都市シリーズ

TUNE BUST

風水街都 香港〈上〉

著○川上稔

HONGKONG

電撃文庫

H.K. at 1997

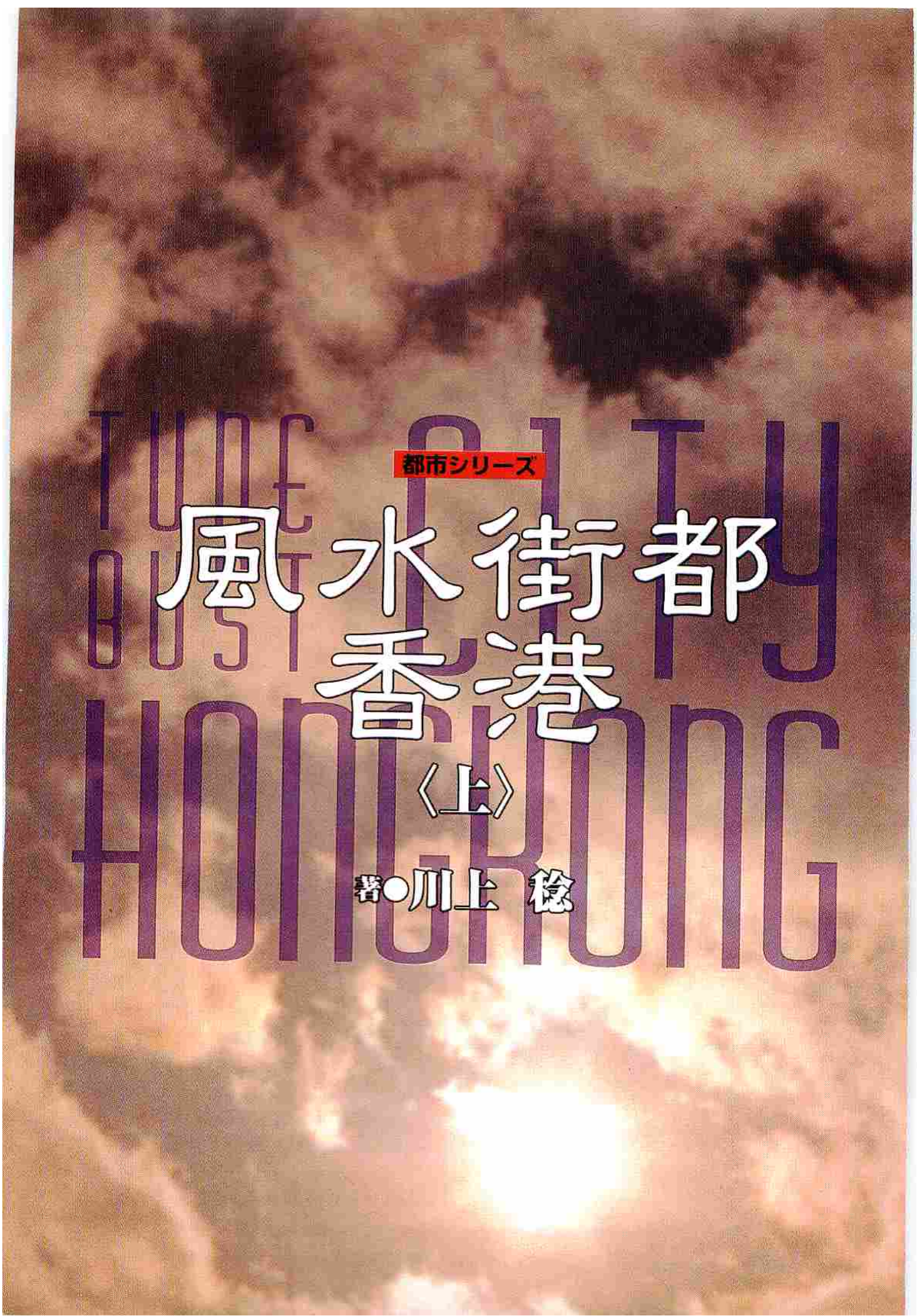
都市シリーズ

風水街都 香港〈上〉

著●川上稔

FUNE BUSTLING

電撃文庫


都市シリーズ
風水街都
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〈上〉
著●川上 稔

Akira

Race: Seraph
Occupation: Tuner,
Hong Kong Yard
Cleared Officer

1: “6/13/1997” (4:16)
2: “Equals” (8:46)

I first want to think about my existence as it pertains to the city of Hong Kong.
When I left that hole, I had no past and Tuning became a solid guideline for me.
Perhaps it would be too much to call it a weapon that cannot be removed.
Tuning is not a weapon. It is something else.
Yes, just like the city’s elders say, it is a method of firing dragons and manipulating the yin and the yang.
It is a pleasant method.
I am confident in my ability to never lose to anyone in Tuning.
It is a pleasant confidence.

[1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

Characters 1

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[1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

3: “Take a Reason” (5:13)
4: “Running Image” (11:42)
I met a man in the city.
His occupation is to destroy the Lives that I create.
I tried to run away from him.
Why?
Because I felt talent in him? Or because he peeked inside my heart?
The one thing I realized is that he can likely approach the past I left in that hole and do so in real time.
The world really is a big place.
At any rate, I feel like I can escape that loneliness that belongs to no one.

Gunmal
Race: Human
Occupation: Buster (Second son of the Maldrick family, a European Buster family)

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Race: Human

Occupation: Buster (Second son of the Maldrick family, a European Buster family)

Double Lee

Race: Seraph
Occupation: Tuner,
Formerly of Archs RDC
Special Duty Division

5: “Corresponding Pair” (7:11)

The next thing I knew, he was by my side.
Only a little over twenty-four hours had passed since we had first met.
While eating lunch together, we discussed our relatives and I had to change the subject. Adult conversations are hard.
The one thing I know for sure is that I have an enemy.
Where?
Probably in my everyday life, where I eat meals like this.
The enemy is probably doing the same.
Then who is it?
That I do not know.
There are so many people, human or otherwise.

[1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

Characters 2

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There are so many people, human or otherwise.

[1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

6: “Series of Phenomena” (14:11)
An old friend died.
Something is shifting him and me from reality. In contrast, the case is fitting together like a jigsaw puzzle.
The Tune Emblem drawn in a giant circle was somehow familiar. It gave me a very bad feeling.
Was the past I left in that hole like incombustible waste that was never burned away?
The past has become important.
I look at him and ask a question.
“Will you search for me?”

7: “Chase the Rhythm” (9:56)
I suddenly decided to prepare, but I was not sure what preparations to make.
For now, I decided to meet with him. We took some unfamiliar steps and had a one-on-one conversation.
It’s strange how our thoughts would reach each other instead of our words.
I told him so much and left him with my baggage.
I told him the enemy is a relative of mine and that I am the reason for the battle.
And I told him about my everyday life (that was the most important part).
What I most wanted to get across is a thought I cannot put in words, but there is nothing I can do about that.

General

Race: Human
Occupation: Hong Kong Yard Special Vehicles Unit Commander

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8: “A Tell” (7:21)
The battle to resolve everything begins.
My body is exhausted.
What did they call it? Oh, right. This might be the exhaustion of Words Warn. An incurable disease? I’m gonna cry.
But the fighting continues and we’ve had the entire past of this city placed before us.
Whether you call it history or memories, we’re being told to correct that vague stream that you can’t escape or grasp.
My past is undoubtedly included in that. I should ask him about it.
This battle is so intense that the sound is permeating my body.

9: “Talk Show” (6:18)
10: “Normal Verdict” (3:31)
The next thing I knew, he and I were collapsed at the bottom of that hole.
The people around us were all looking at us and I was self-conscious of the wings on my back.
It was a brief rest.
As we did that, the enemy appeared again.
And yet he and I have not even changed the past surrounding us...no, surrounding this city.
What should we prioritize?

Rin

Race: Human
Occupation: Tuner,
Hong Kong Yard
Criminal Investigation
Division Head Officer

[1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

Characters 3

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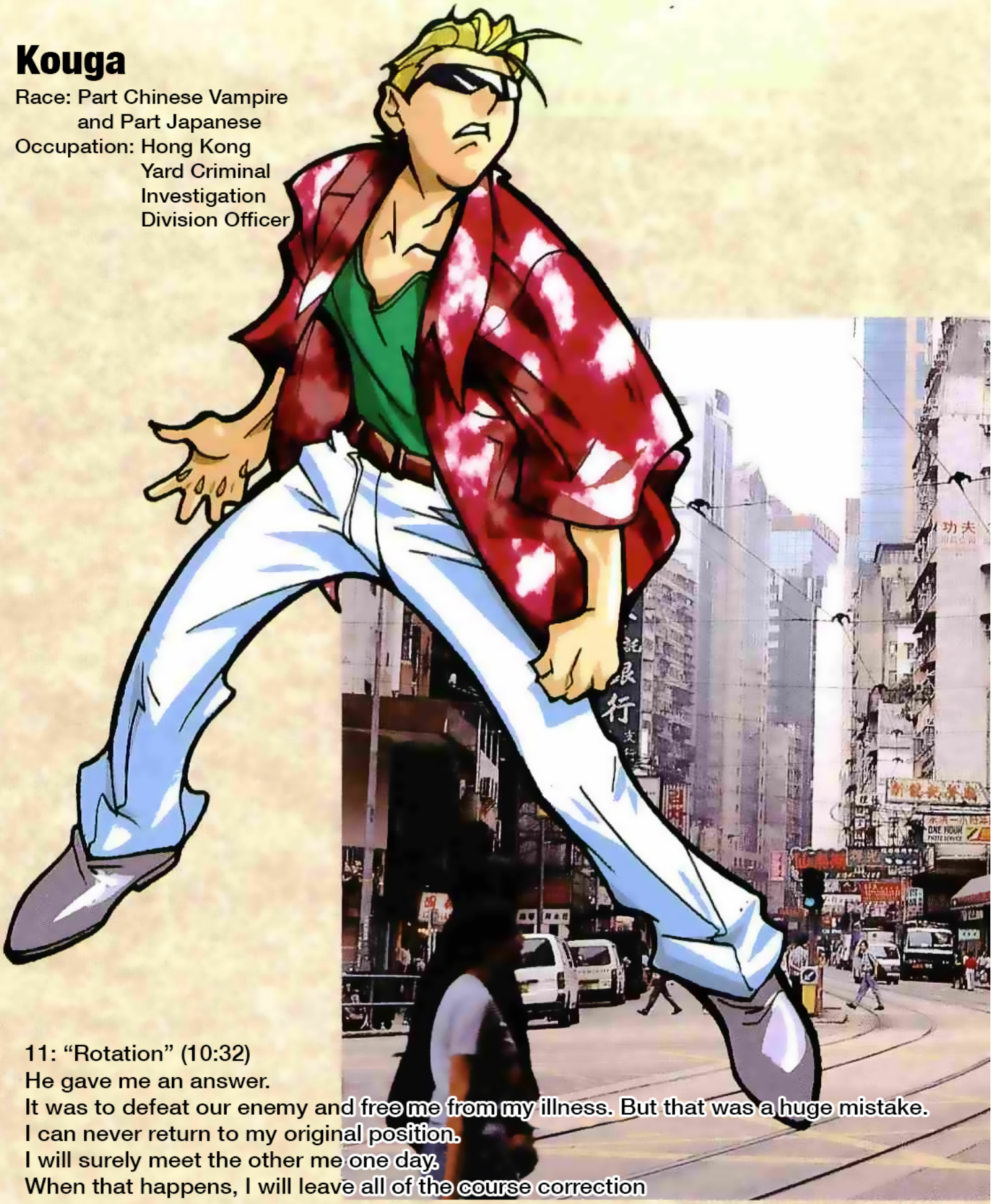
Occupation: Tuner, Hong Kong Yard Criminal Investigation Division Head Officer

[1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

Kouga

Race: Part Chinese Vampire
and Part Japanese
Occupation: Hong Kong
Yard Criminal
Investigation
Division Officer



11: “Rotation” (10:32)
He gave me an answer.
It was to defeat our enemy and free me from my illness. But that was a huge mistake.
I can never return to my original position.
I will surely meet the other me one day.
When that happens, I will leave all of the course correction
to them (me, him, and our enemy).
If I do that, she will not live on yet fail to change the past like we did. She will vanish yet pass her Wild Name onto her child and save this city.
Yes.
I will have her make a song.
Then everything will work out.

Kouga

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According to the Treaty of Nanking, Hong Kong Island became British territory. Fearing the arrival of non-humans, the people of Hong Kong created Hong Kong Cave and an underground city on the Kowloon Peninsula and they resisted until the very end. The war lasted a year, but it ended when the angels intervened and brought reconciliation.

KOW-
LOON

Second Divine Punishment War (1895)
In a terrorist attack by radicals of the revolutionary Revive China Society, a biological weapon was detonated at the deepest point of Hong Kong Cave and the cave became a well of death. However, the angels had a high resistance and survived. The incident also put Hong Kong under full British control, so conspiracy theories spread that the angels had been behind the detonation of the biological weapon.

TSING
YI

MONG
KOK

HUNG
HOM

Third Divine Punishment War (1925)
Radicals in the Chinese military attacked to recover Hong Kong and fierce fighting began with the Hong Kong Civilian Police who were militarily supported by Hong Kong's shopping district. The suppression and revival of this fight led to the expansion of several corporations centered on Archs RDC. Hong Kong transformed into a world-famous trading city.

HONG
KONG
ISLAND

Fourth Divine Punishment War (1958)
Radicals in the Chinese government's military invaded Hong Kong Cave through the underground passageway to the mainland and began fighting. In the process, a chemical weapon was detonated in Hong Kong Cave and the angels' immune systems were destroyed. To recover their resistance, the angels have since reproduced with humans to give birth to Nein Engels, but this also led to the persecution of angels.

Fifth Divine Punishment War (1973)
An internal conflict spread through Hong Kong's underworld and developed into a war when government troops near the border were dragged into it. Hong Kong Yard was established. The war was used to shift blame onto the Nein Engels and led to widespread hunting of Nein Engels. On the night of June 30 when the war came to an end, every human in Hong Kong had a nightmare of Hong Kong being destroyed.

LAMMA
ISLAND

"Flight Song"

彼街通天地
墜朝地仰雲
That city connects heaven and earth
I fall in the morning and look up to the clouds from the earth

昇夜空謳月
惟望再笑君
I rise at night and sing with the moon in the sky
All I desire is to smile with you again

PO TOI
ISLAND

Wars

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Map Locations:

Top left: Tsing Yi

Top middle left: Mong Kok

Top middle right: Kowloon

Below Kowloon: Hung Hom

Middle: Hong Kong Island

Bottom Left: Lamma Island

Bottom Right: Po Toi Island

City Series:Volume3a Opening

You have forgotten

The answer that you surely must recite

Someday and somewhere

So now

I ask you from heaven

When this city changes

Your answer will be absolutely necessary

Morning Section - Opening: 6/13/1997 (1:16)

Now, before heading to Hong Kong, let us move our gaze to a land covered in the light of dawn.

It was a dry wasteland covered in red sand.

The round morning sun was visible in the vast sky supported by that wasteland.

The sunlight beat down on the wasteland with transparent heat.

The blazing wasteland contained a crater created by smashing the earth.

Shimmering heat rose from the broken red clay of the crater that was at least a kilometer in radius and one hundred meters deep.

The center of the hole rose up a bit like a circular pedestal.

A young man stood atop the pedestal.

His straight brown hair stood up and he had a carefree look in his eyes.

He carried a traveler's gunny sack over his shoulder.

He held a blade that looked like a mix between a wind instrument and a sword. It was a weapon known as a Device.

The end of the Device's blade touched the ground and several shining objects had fallen to the ground around it.

They were fragments of metal.

The fragments were made of brass, steel, bronze, and other metals, but they all shined like glass.

And…

"…"

The young man carried out his action in silence.

He gently tapped the tip of the Device's blade against the ground.

This produced a loud sound.

At the same time, sound and light came from the Device's blade.

It was a white light and sound.

The tone coming from the blade was the same color as the light and the light was the same color as the tone. And both of them were much like the tone color of the Device tapping the ground.

The Device was amplifying the "Action Live" of "tapping".

The clear Live emitted light and sound.

The young man raised the Device in his right hand. The gloved hand gripped the hilt and he unemotionally swung the Device down on the Live and its white Word Color.

The light and sound swallowed up the metal fragments on the ground.

The Lives giving the fragments form were changed.

The metal fragments had caused countless sharp reflections of light, but now they undulated, shook, trembled, and burst like a liquid spilled from a bowl.

When they burst, they emitted a faint light and the Verbal Tempo of a quiet cry. Afterwards, they vanished.

The tone of the Live had vanished from the young man's Device as well.

The fingernail-sized fragments of metal had vanished from around the blade tip kissing the ground.

Their Lives had lost to the Live emitted by the young man and been destroyed.

He took a breath, stuck his left hand in his pocket, and pulled out a letter.

"From Hong Kong, hm?"

England was set to return that city to China in just a few weeks.

He muttered the name a few more times and faced forward.

He saw the gentle wall that formed the edge of the crater.

The reddish brown earthen wall had already cooled.

When he saw it, the young man's face suddenly twisted a bit. This twisting was the complete opposite of a smile or joy.

But he immediately got rid of it and took a step forward.

He was preparing to leave that hole.

And he said just one thing.

“It’s been five years since I last saw my brother.”

Act 1: Equals (8:46)

Part 1

“Fire!”

That deep command was given just as gunshots and shellfire burst through the night air.

The bright bullets fired by men in blue uniforms flew straight down a large shopping district road and approached their target.

Their target was a beast that looked out of place in the city of Hong Kong. It was a tiger.

However, it was not a normal tiger. It was colored blue and it was nearly four meters tall.

Several sparks scattered from the large tiger and countless explosions could be heard.

Those bursting sounds were followed by spreading white smoke.

“Did we get it!?”

The men in blue uniforms filled the street like a solid wall and they looked to their victory beyond the smoke.

But that victory suddenly vanished before their eyes.

Something appeared beyond the smoke about one hundred meters away. The same blue tiger had grown even larger.

The *Qinghu* shook its head several times to shake off the smoke and lightly snorted.

It showed no sign of damage from the previous attack.

The men were dumbfounded as they watched.

But if the right person had been watching, they would have seen an irregular blue stream of sound surrounding the men.

Those were the Lives that gave form to the emotion of fear.

“Is anyone from Cleared here!?”

The commander cried out as if to sweep away that Lives floating around them.

“What’s that *Qinghu*’s Octave?”

He was answered by a middle-aged uniformed man carrying a Device.

“Its Live is unsteadily fluctuating between an Octave of 320,000 and 40,000.”

Normal Tuners and Busters could only manipulate Lives at an Octave of around 80,000 and only within a range of just over five meters. However, this *Qinghu* had an Octave of 320,000.

“Our attacks are going to be too far removed from it, which is dangerous.”

“What happens when the Octave is so different?”

“We’ll only increase the disturbance in its Live. In other words, it’ll grow bigger like just now.”

“You know that tiger was originally a restaurant, right? Can’t we do something!? If the light bringers of Hong Kong Yard are defeated, who’s going to stop it?”

His fairly hysterical question reverberated through the air.

The Cleared member it was directed at could likely see the commander's Live and he watched for the man's reaction as he spoke.

"The offensive Busters and Hounds can't hope to oppose something on this level. …But we called in Akira who was off duty."

"Akira? You mean that Seraph girl who's always talking nonsense!?"

His question was answered by the *Qinghu*'s roar.

The great beast was now eight meters tall and it roared toward heaven.

"…!"

As British territory, Hong Kong's night sky contained an entrance to the same heaven as the Aerial City. A long roar rang through that sky and shook the city.

"Is it coming!?"

The commander prepared himself as his body vibrated from the roar.

The Device-wielding man took a similar stance next to him.

"Don't worry. She'll definitely be here! She's Hong Kong's best Tuner, after all."

"Can we really rely on a Nein Engel!?"

After that comment, the *Qinghu* moved forward.

"!"

The atmosphere around them all stiffened.

In an instant, sharp Lives of murderous intent raced between the *Qinghu* and the men.

The Verbal Tempo of those sharp, direct Lives was quite simple.

And that may have been why someone rode on that stream.

Someone flew down from the night sky and landed in the center of the murderous intent between the men and tiger.

It was a girl.

She wore the same color of uniform as the men and she had two wings on her back.

The Cleared member shouted toward the light coming from her wings.

“Help has arrived! She’s the Tuner who can control an Octave of 1,028,000!”

Part 2

The winged girl went by the Urban Name of Akira.

She was either twenty or in her late teens.

The wings on her back were nothing special.

Hong Kong was British territory and Britain had long been a nation of monsters, most notably in Aerial City – London.

“…”

She said nothing.

Her tied-back hair was the same color as her wings, those angular golden wings moved slightly, and she raised her head.

Below her thick eyebrows, her eyes moved without missing a thing. Her gaze looked far past the empty shopping district street and to the Yard men wielding a variety of weapons.

She could see each of them emitting Lives filled with the Word Color of tension. That pale purple light spilled like sand and floated below the wall of blue.

Akira gave a small bitter smile.

"The general unit is here along with the combat unit. …Did the Searchers try to lure the *Qinghu* away?"

…I feel like a surrounded criminal.

As soon as she thought that, she heard a growl behind her.

It was the tiger.

The eight meter tall tiger gave off a bluish-white phosphorescence.

It raised its front paw as if playing.

"Wah!"

Seeing white claws approaching her, Akira flew to the side and into the night sky. She avoided the wind produced by its claws and danced through the night air that was heated by the shopping district.

Her sharp wings had a single main section which loudly beat against the wind.

She soared.

"Oh! That was close!"

After only two flaps, she had risen as high as a five-story building and she spread her wings behind her. The wings expelled air to bring her to a stop.

She looked down from this height where the smells of the different food stands and restaurants reached her.

She saw the *Qinghu*.

The beast was large enough to fill the street and its giant yellow eyes looked up at her.

…This is a big one.

She licked her lips, nodded once, and held up her Device in midair. It was shaped like a short sword, but a quick shake was enough to extend the hilt into a spear as long as she was tall.

"…"

She swung down the spear and took a breath.

"!"

Without warning, she began to rush through the air.

She oriented her body parallel to the ground and raced straight down at the *Qinghu*.

All she heard was the sound of the air rushing past her.

Her target was its back. When fighting a four-legged beast, attacking from above was safest.

"Take this!"

She twisted her body to lower her downward momentum and thrust the spear straight into the blue back below her.

The sound was identical to that of tearing paper.

She felt a strange metallic sensation entirely different from flesh.

At the same time, the *Qinghu*'s Live reached her through the spear.

A Live was the flow that gave form to objects, emotions, and actions. Essentially, it was the rhythm of ether.

As a Tuner, Akira could read the *Qinghu*'s Live.

"Its Octave is 320,000. Over four times what a normal person can control, hm? No wonder I was called in."

The Live itself was a heavy sound, its Word Color was a mineral gray, and its Tempo was slow.

That information gave her an image. She was able to read the Message expressed by the Live that the *Qinghu* was singing.

It was…

…A building!?

That was entirely different from its appearance as a tiger.

As soon as Akira read that Message, the *Qinghu* turned its head to look at her on its back.

"Not good!"

Instinctively sensing danger, she used her wings to fly backwards.

Seeing the glare of those pure yellow eyes and hearing the roar, she landed on the roof of a bookstore.

She kept her eyes on her opponent and analyzed its identity. She thought about the Message she had seen when reading its Live.

The Message in her mind showed a three-story concrete building.

…I've seen that building before. It's a fancy restaurant in Yau Ma Tei, isn't it?

The restaurant's owner would be leaving in about half a month when ownership of Hong Kong was returned from Britain, so it had been scheduled for demolition.

The building had turned into this blue tiger.

"A disturbance in the restaurant's Live transformed it into a tiger? Hong Kong is a dangerous place these days."

A smile appeared on Akira's lips as she muttered to herself.

At the same time, an electronic tone came from her uniform's pocket. Her cellphone was ringing.

After two rings, it automatically answered and a woman's voice came from her coat pocket.

"Are you in your usual place, Akira?"

Akira answered while watching the *Qinghu* that stared motionlessly at her.

"I am. I'm fighting, but…"

"But what?"

"Rin, can I ask something?"

"What is it? I'm busy with a new a case that just came in, so keep it within forty characters, punctuation included."

"Why was the general unit sent out against this?"

"Including the question mark, that's…forty exactly. You really do give the most boring answers."

"That's…not the issue here! What if they get caught in the Tuning!?"

"Don't worry. If that happens, I'll use my authority to have you take responsibility."

"That's not a normal thing to say, Rin."

"Sorry, but the cell signal isn't getting through very well. Well, I can leave all this Live-related stuff to our genius Tuner."

Akira's shoulders shook a bit at being called a genius. She imagined the expression on the face of her glasses-wearing female boss.

"You're just saying that to force me to do something again, aren't you?"

"You're the one with the dream of using Tuning to send out a giant Death Techno dragon. Think of this as training."

"I at least have the right to choose how I train!"

"All personal opinions are rejected."

"Then don't use people's dreams to give them a personal reason for doing things! Honestly, how about you come join me out here!?"

As if reacting to her shout, the *Qinghu* began to move.

"Ah! Stay back!"

It ignored her protest and leaped upwards.

It stretched out to the front and back and came to crush the bookstore she stood on.

Part 3

The roar of the ground being struck rang out in a great surge.

The destruction occurred in an instant.

"That was close."

Akira sounded almost carefree as she landed on the red roof of a neighboring shop.

While trying to get up, the *Qinghu* slammed a front paw into the roof.

"Wah!"

Akira was launched into the air by the roof's flexibility and she performed a flip before landing on the road.

By that time, the *Qinghu* had gotten back up.

Looking at it a little differently, the two of them could be seen as a bird and a cat.

The predator and prey's eyes met.

…This is uncomfortable.

Akira's fears were justified.

So…

"Try to calm down, okay?"

With that comment, she turned her back on the *Qinghu* and began to run.

She began her escape to buy some time. Meanwhile, she sensed the *Qinghu* dashing behind her.

…How am I supposed to defeat this thing?

She continued to run while keeping her wings up so she could take flight at any moment. She rushed through the deserted shopping district.

The light brown streetlights illuminated her.

She heard her racing footsteps, breathing, and pulse as well as the much louder sounds of buildings and storefront stands being destroyed behind her.

The pursuing footsteps were growing closer and closer. She occasionally heard something like stones striking each other right behind her head, and she knew that had to be the tiger's teeth striking together.

…Not good, not good, not good! I'm really gonna be eaten!

She faced forward and found the blue wall of police officers a mere thirty meters ahead.

She was shocked to find they were all aiming their guns and cannons her way.

A closer look showed their commander was raising one hand.

But he was not greeting her.

"Eh? Wait! I'm right here!"

"Fire!"

The roar of gunfire reached her.

White smoke rose in front of the blue wall and pure red bullets of light shot out.

“Wah!”

Akira flew backwards as if something had repelled her.

This surprised the *Qinghu* pursuing her from behind. This strange action by its prey made it stumble.

She slipped between its hesitant legs.

She quickly moved behind the *Qinghu*.

An instant later, she heard something explode.

A solid impact slammed into the giant beast and sent it into the air over Akira’s head.

“You idiots! Don’t disturb its Live any more!”

The *Qinghu* grew even larger because the bombardment had further disturbed its Live.

Avoiding its giant form as it fell was not an easy task.

She flew backwards just like before.

With a great roar, the *Qinghu*’s back fell to the ground, but it immediately twisted around and stood up.

It was glaring at Akira, but she ignored it.

She caught her breath and started back down the same path she had run before.

As she did, she struck the destroyed buildings with the tip of her spear. Doing so emitted sound and light from the Device.

She was preparing to Tune.

“Oh, you 640,000 Octave Lives surrounding me! You silent stone, chirping wood, and murmuring glass, can you hear my Live!?”

She cried out and sang her own Live.

It began with “la”.

The Word Color was the white of moonlight and it had a loud, gentle Tempo.

That created a Message.

The Message combined an image of the destroyed building with the flapping wings of birds.

The rubble enveloped by the spear’s light and sound was transformed.

The wooden rubble became brown birds.

The concrete rubble became large white and gray birds.

The glass shards became small blue birds.

More were created as she ran and they flew into the night sky to avoid the pursuing *Qinghu*.

This was the Live healing that Akira could perform as a Tuner.

Tuning would use some other Message to regulate disturbed Lives.

All of the flying birds would eventually return to their proper locations. Then they would return to their original form as wood or walls. But instead of the rubble, they would have become the original buildings once more.

That was the end result of Live healing through Tuning.

Akira continued singing and brought the blade of her Device to her own body.

Some light raced through her.

The light had an orange Word Color and the Tempo of a slightly quickened pulse.

It was the Live of fear.

She used Tuning to expel the emotion from her body and she manipulated those Lives. The orange balls of light became small orange mice that hid behind the nearby rubble.

She sighed when she saw it.

"Okay. I can do this."

With that, she returned to her starting point.

She stopped and faced forward to find the *Qinghu* charging toward her, but she did not mind.

She could hear a radio that had been playing for a while.

The broadcast was playing a certain song.

彼街通天地 (That city connects heaven and earth)

墜朝地仰雲 (I fall in the morning and look up to the clouds from the earth)

昇夜空謳月 (I rise at night and sing with the moon in the sky)

惟望再笑君 (All I desire is to smile with you again)

That was the Flight Song which had long been passed down in Hong Kong.

…My parents liked that song, didn't they?

Listening to it calmed her pulse and breathing.

Her opponent was approaching up ahead. It raised its claws and slammed them down toward her, but she charged forward.

She matched the arcing movement of the lowering claws and moved right up to the beast. She felt a brief, sharp pain in her back, but she ignored it.

She looked up and saw the *Qinghu*'s throat.

That was the core.

She gathered strength in her legs and slammed her entire body into it as she drove the tip of her spear into that one point.

With the sound of tearing paper, the *Qinghu* stopped moving.

And she had her Device send out her own Live.

Her Live was a single sound beginning with "la". Its Word Color was gray and its Tempo was on the slower side. The Message it conveyed was the Yau Ma Tei restaurant. And the image she included was…

It did not even take three seconds for it all to end.

Part 4

Akira fell to her knees while surrounded by countless colors of cats.

"Maybe I split it up too much. This is too much noise."

She had Tuned the *Qinghu*, but to ensure that the proper Live and the disturbed Live did not reflexively echo off each other, she had split off every 10,000 Octaves into a separate kitten.

"With forty-four of them, I bet a cat-lover could barely contain themselves. …Come here. Good boy."

She reached out a hand and a green cat approached from the group.

It mewed sweetly and she pet its head.

"…"

She was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief and look up into the sky.

The moon was out in the deep night sky.

The sky over England's Aerial City – London contained a door to the heaven that had been destroyed during the previous world war. Hong Kong was still British territory because it had yet to be returned to China, so the same door was opened in its sky.

"But you can't see the chapter title pages and celestial dome even in the moonlight."

She lowered her gaze and looked down the road.

Far, far down the road, the men in Yard uniforms were looking her way and slowly approaching.

She could faintly see their Lives.

Most of them had the yellow Word Color of praise. Some red was mixed in because of the newcomers who had gotten too worked up during the earlier gunfire.

It may have been even less common than the red, but she did see the purple of doubt.

…Not bad for a Nein Engel.

A Nein Engel was a hybrid between an angel and a human.

But Akira was not bothered by those doubtful Messages.

"That's right, isn't it?"

The cats she had unraveled from the *Qinghu* tilted their heads at her question.

She smiled bitterly at the action.

A brief dull pain raced along her back.

She touched it and could tell she had been nicked when charging underneath the *Qinghu* earlier.

The injury was not on either of her two large wings. It was on the inside of those wings.

…On one of the small deformed wings. I can't believe it.

Deformities were common in Nein Engels. As a Seraph Nein Engel, she should have had six wings, but four of them had grown in far too small. They were so small that the average person would not even notice them.

…Looks like it's stopped bleeding, so I guess I'll get it treated later.

That was when she heard what sounded like stone being struck.

"…!?"

That was the sound of a Live being destroyed.

She looked up in surprise and saw a man in midair.

"What?"

Before she could wonder what was happening, the man fell to her feet.

A dull sound and a wet sound reached her ears.

“Blood!?”

The dark red substance spreading along the road came from a terrible wound. She ignored the quickly fleeing cats and ran over to him.

He had messy hair and wore intellectual glasses. He seemed to be in his late twenties. If they had not been stained with blood, his clothes would have been very nice. Lastly, he held the remains of a Device.

As soon as she saw the shape of the Device, Akira realized who the man was.

“Gunmal!?”

She shouted the kind of Urban Name used by Busters and Tuners and she lifted him into a sitting position.

There was no mistaking it.

She had never met the man before, but she had seen him in the newspapers a few times. Despite working as a Buster, he had revealed his Wild Name to the public. That real name he hid with the Urban Name of Gunmal was…

“Hong Kong’s greatest Buster, J-Gun Maldrick.”

Tuners rearranged Lives to change objects’ forms and fix them, but Busters destroyed Lives to destroy objects and remake them. Busters created the Devices used in Tuning and Busting and all Busters were expert fighters.

“Why is Hong Kong’s greatest Buster on the verge of death!?”

J-Gun’s eyes opened at her question.

His weak eyes briefly showed a hint of surprise.

"I can't believe this. Even after destroying space itself, I can't escape the Nein Engels."

"Eh!?"

Despite her obvious confusion, J-Gun gave a smile at being released from his exhaustion and closed his eyes. As he did so, his lips moved.

"Someone, please call…"

"Call!? Call who!?"

"They can…Hong Kong's destruction… They can…our home…"

His voice and his Live shrank and diminished.

"I'm sorry, Genius."

With those words as her sign, Akira raised her Device.

…Will I make it in time?

"I am Hong Kong's greatest Tuner."

She reminded herself of that, took a deep breath, and pressed the tip of the spear against J-Gun's chest.

A moment later, she thought she felt her mind waver.

Part 5

After only a few seconds, Akira woke up.

She looked around and found herself in a strange world.

She saw an unfamiliar city of ruins around her.

She saw broken pillars, crumbled walls, scattered rooftops, twisted and broken signs, and other things that were smashed beyond recognition. They were all gathered together to create a city of ruins.

Akira stood at the center of it all.

"!?"

With that question, she realized this was a memory Message sent by J-Gun's Live. His Live had flowed back through her Device as she tried to Tune heal him.

She was seeing the past from his perspective, so this had to be his life flashing before his eyes in the moment before death.

She saw a boy in front of her. He appeared to be fourteen or fifteen and his hair was the same color as J-Gun's.

The boy was crying.

Two Devices lay at his feet.

One was only cracked, but the other had completely shattered.

"…"

Her vision suddenly moved. It stared at the fallen Device and reached out a hand.

J-Gun scooped up the broken fragments of the shattered Device and looked to the teary eyes of the boy.

He spoke.

"My Device shattered when it struck yours."

And…

"Little brother, which of us will succeed the Maldrick family?"

The younger brother did not answer his older brother's question.

That was enough.

J-Gun pulled a ring from his pocket and the younger brother watched his movements while still crying.

J-Gun suddenly stopped moving.

Akira realized he was forcing a smile.

“This is fine. With the city like this, you won’t even find any bodies to bury. …People who live together don’t need murderous Busters or Tuners.”

J-Gun threw the ring into the surrounding ruins and he said one thing more.

“Don’t turn out like me.”

The vision ended there.

J-Gun’s Live had vanished.

Part 6

The moon and stars looked large from the empty Beaufort Island south of Hong Kong Island.

A six-winged Nein Engel stood alone atop a hill of volcanic rock at the center of the island.

The male Seraph wore a white combat coat and he stared up into the night sky.

“That city connects heaven and earth, hm?”

He recited a line from the Flight Song and smiled bitterly.

“The moon is lovely tonight. …It is so unnecessarily bright.”

He held the chest of his coat where the white coat was wet with blood from the inside.

However, there was no hint of pain on his face.

“The dying Buster managed to escape. …What should we do about that?”

His tone was light and he looked around the area.

The island had been oddly transformed. The ground of volcanic rock had been torn, smashed, and melted.

A battle had occurred here.

“Perhaps it would be best to heal this land.”

His lightly raised hand held a Device sword.

It glowed dully, it somewhat resembled a musical instrument, and it was very similar to the Device that J-Gun had held.

He raised it, opened his mouth, and prepared to send out his Live.

But a sudden out-of-place sound stopped him. It was an electronic tone.

“?”

The Nein Engel’s hand reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small communicator.

Static sounded briefly.

“Fei? This is Double Lee.”

He took a breath.

“I made a bit of a mistake. Two of them actually. First, I have… likely killed J-Gun Maldrick. We can hold a meeting about that later. …Yes, call Genius too. And during the battle, the bottle of blood was destroyed. Can you bring the one meant for the final ceremony?”

He lowered his raised Device and began to walk.

He moved toward what seemed to be the highest point of the volcanic rock hill.

“I will complete the ceremony. Nothing will happen during the first ceremony, so don’t worry. After that, we can carry out the second ceremony, but to complete our preparations for the final one, we need an appropriate Device, right? …Yes. I just hope we can find a Buster who can make one better than this ADs. I would prefer to avoid using necromancy. …Yes, we also need the blood of a good Nein Engel. I am aware of that.”

With that said, he switched off the communicator and stopped walking.

He stood at the peak of the hill.

“Now I need to call in an Octave measuring in the tens of millions. And all to prepare the first repatriation ceremony based on the Flight Song. I must revive heaven.”

He returned the communicator to his pocket and reached the same hand into his coat.

He pulled out some broken glass covered in blood.

He threw it away and then pulled out more shards. He repeated the process again and again as he removed the pieces of the broken bottle.

“What to do now?” he muttered. “This means I need to kill a Nein Engel before the final ceremony.”

His eyes were turned toward Hong Kong Island.

The city of Hong Kong looked especially bright in the night and it illuminated the sky from below.

Interlude 1

The first thing Akira said after returning to her apartment barely escaped her lips.

"Ahh… What a day. I'm exhausted."

She leaned against the small kitchen wall and checked the clock to see it was three in the morning.

…No wonder the city's Lives are so quiet.

The Lives of Mong Kok were so lively during the day, but this late, she could only hear the roar of the sea to the west.

As the sound of the waves reached her ears, Akira leaned her spear Device against the wall.

She gave a long yawn. While releasing that relaxed breath, she moved to the back room.

It doubled as a living room and a bedroom and it was a British-style room with a wooden floor. It contained a bed, a side table, an oddly new TV, a sanxian that she had long played, and a bookcase with a cloth covering each shelf.

She looked to the top shelf of the bookcase.

A picture frame stood there.

"Can you believe it, mom and dad? Someone died this time."

She called out to the people in the picture as she picked up the frame.

She blew on it to get rid of the dust.

The photograph in the wooden frame showed her family.

Her father was the only human and the rest had wings on their backs.

It seemed to be a very old photo. The young girl clinging to her mother was Akira.

And a boy stood next to that girl.

"If my brother was here, he'd be so mad at me for not saving someone's life as a Tuner."

Her eyes turned to her parents.

Her father had sharp Asian eyes and a large scar on his cheek.

She sighed.

"Dad, this is a difficult thing, isn't it?"

She tried to keep her tone light and she sat on the bed.

…What would mom and dad say if they were still alive?

With that unanswerable question in her heart, she set the picture frame down on her lap.

She then reached for the TV remote near the pillow.

She hit the power button and the TV in the corner of the room filled with light.

"Is this the case Rin mentioned?"

The news should have been over by this time, but text would appear on the screen to provide emergency information. Currently, white text was displayed on a blue background.

"Early this morning, President Huang Daquan of Archs RDC, Hong Kong's largest trading company, died. The cause of death was massive blood loss. The knife he was holding upon discovery was confirmed to be the cause. The reason for his suicide is unknown and the investigation is underway. Huang Daquan was the first Nein Engel born in Hong Kong and this incident is expected to influence a number of fields, including the management of the unnumbered Hong Kong Cave."

"I see." Akira nodded. "This Nein Engel named Huang left Hong Kong Cave like me. In a way, I'm following in his footsteps. …An Archs has no lifespan or illness, but he still killed himself. …What a shame."

Huang Daquan's Archs RDC was the largest trading company in Hong Kong and it performed some special operations.

"Like material support for Hong Kong Cave."

Akira looked up and out the window.

The south-facing window showed the lights that were opposing the heavy Lives of the night's darkness.

Those lights belonged to the mainland area of Hong Kong called Kowloon.

"…"

She looked even further up and to the ocean just barely visible beyond the peninsula.

She stared intently at it and saw some small lights on that sea.

The faint lights asserting their presence there were as numerous as scattered flower petals and as small as the holes of an ant colony.

Those lights belonged to the other part of Hong Kong: Hong Kong Island.

That island was surrounded by the darkness and the sea and it had a strange shape.

Its silhouette looked like it had been pushed down on from above until it bent into a U-shape.

There was a simple reason for that appearance: there was a large hole in the center of the giant island.

The lines of light on the island showed the giant pit that measured at least a kilometer across.

That was Hong Kong Cave.

It was not a mere hole. It contained a large community made up of Nein Engels. The authorities of Hong Kong viewed it as an unnumbered zone outside of their authority.

"It's already been three years since I left there and saw my dad's death."

Akira muttered to herself and looked away. After sighing, she lowered her eyes a little.

Her gaze shifted to the picture frame on her lap.

While looking at her family, she suddenly recalled something her brother had often said long ago.

…I'll take the Nein Engels to heaven. And I'll restore heaven!

On her deathbed, her mother had said that restoring heaven was an impossible dream after its destruction in World War Two. But the woman had also smiled and said it would be nice if it did happen.

"It really would be nice."

Akira smiled and lay on her side.

…I'm so tired.

She usually slept in the nude, but tonight her exhaustion won out over her usual habit.

She felt like her body was heavily sinking down and a sudden memory of the past returned to her.

It was from when her entire family had lived in Hong Kong Cave together.

Much like her brother, she had spoken of her own dream in front of her sick mother.

Just as she fell asleep, she muttered those same words.

"I wish all Nein Engels and humans could live together like mom and dad

Act 2: Take a Reason (5:13)

Part 1

Hong Kong Yard's main office was in the Kowloon administrative district in the center of Hong Kong's Kowloon Peninsula.

At first glance, the building looked like a giant bridge. Specifically, a bridge made of junk.

There were a few different reasons for that.

First, the first floor had been entirely removed to make a parking lot for tanks and motorcycles.

Second, the building was connected to Kowloon's shopping district to form one giant piece of artwork.

And third, gathering all those different buildings created a mosaic of varying structures.

Hong Kong Yard had been created when the British Hong Kong Force had been privatized. Morning was currently arriving there.

The pale light reached the bricks, the wooden walls, and the windows that contained giant bars instead of glass.

The sunlight gradually grew.

It was most bright on the eastern end of the second floor where a single white wall miraculously continued for five whole meters.

That was the center of the Yard's headquarters where about three hundred people worked.

If one followed the light and looked in through the windows, one would see facilities far more refined than the exterior suggested.

In a room that looked like a great hall, partitions were set up between the different divisions and personnel were gathered at all of the desks.

Expensive-looking sofas were lined up by the windows.

Currently, one person was sitting in a sofa with their back to the white sky.

It was a woman wearing a men's suit.

Her unrounded glasses eliminated any kindness in her expression, but her braided hair gave her a feminine look that looked out of place with her suit.

"Kouga," she said. "Have the newspapers caught scent of it?"

She was speaking to a desk near the window.

The young man at the desk had a blonde pompadour and wore a red Hawaiian shirt that did not at all suit the city of Hong Kong.

Despite his appearance, he nodded respectfully to his boss and showed her the newspaper he held.

"Yup. It's front page news. They're even speculating about the breakup of Archs RDC and its collapse as a corporation. …But they're missing one important thing."

"The predicted unemployment rate? Your calculations said this would leave nearly 5% of Hong Kong's laborers unemployed, right?"

"And most of those workers are fathers, so their families are in trouble too."

That meant three to five times that number would have no way to put food on the table.

"I'd like to think they realized the truth but decided not to print it because they didn't want to cause a panic," said Rin as she pushed up her glasses. "There's nothing fun about this case. Not only is the secret king of Hong Kong dead, but it happened in a strange 'suicide'."

"That's right. Did you see Huang Daquan's face?"

"Yes. For some reason, an ageless Archs had grown old."

"What does that mean?"

"If only I could see his Live. …I've seen that kind of aging once before."

"Eh!? Where?"

"I don't have any proof yet, but I'll tell you eventually. …But Huang's death was probably suicide after he aged liked that. Maybe it's some new kind of disease."

"Sure," said Kouga.

After a pause, he gave a small sneeze.

Rin glanced his way and reached for the window blind.

It was bright outside and comfortably sunny, but she blocked out that light with the blind.

"Oh, don't worry about me, boss. Even if I am part vampire."

"It was too bright for me."

"Really?"

She ignored his question.

Instead, she let out a quiet bitter laugh.

"But those Nein Engels have caused us quite the problem with only half a month until Hong Kong is returned to China."

"Rough, isn't it? Especially since this is your last chance."

"Are you talking about Fei?"

"You haven't found him after five years of searching, right?"

"Don't worry about it. It isn't your problem."

"But this time when Hong Kong can act on its own is your chance to-…"

"I said it isn't your problem."

Rin's tone silenced Kouga.

After a while, he cleared his throat and opened the newspaper again.

"What kind of person was this Huang Daquan guy?"

"A dictator. According to the General anyway."

"Eh?"

"He died at age 140. All I really know about him is that he was an Archs born in Hong Kong and his father was an Archangel. If his personal history is to be believed, he used the confusion of World War One to create Archs RDC and bring it under his control."

"The article says Archs RDC supports the Nein Engels living in Hong Kong Cave while gaining heavenly knowledge from them by… I can't read this character."

Rin frowned.

"Basically, the corporation was made to eliminate the past stigma about Nein Engels. If Huang had lived another hundred years, the Nein Engels probably could have left Hong Kong Cave without having anything to fear."

"If only they could all come out like Akira."

"She's a special case. But…"

"This is a strange suicide, isn't it? He died of massive blood loss, but not a single blood stain was found in his home."

"You sent out a familiar to search for the blood stains, didn't you?"

Kouga nodded as if to say that was only natural.

At the same time, the door into the headquarters opened.

The person who walked in was an old man with a bent back who wore the jumpsuit of the tank force. His gray hair and narrow eyes gave him an Asian appearance, but he had another defining feature to his face.

He had a large scar from a blade on his right cheek.

Rin quickly stood and bowed when she saw him. Kouga followed suit.

"Good morning, General. You're here early."

The old man known as the General narrowed his eyes that already only looked like lines and he waved a hand for the two of them to sit.

"What's with you two? It's normal for an old man to be up early in the morning."

He stroked the scar on his cheek and sat in his seat by the window.

He was known as a hero who once saved Hong Kong, but he did not act self-important in the slightest. He turned his back on all the papers scattered across his desk and rotated his chair toward Rin and Kouga.

"It seems somethin' weird happened last night, so this morning, my wife insisted I actually work every day 'til Hong Kong's returned to China. I can't stand this."

"Oh, your imaginary wife again?"

"She ain't imaginary. She's just too good to let anyone else see."

"I'd love to see this supposed wife of yours someday," said Rin with a small smile.

Kouga gave a cheerful smile of his own.

"Don't say that, boss. The General's hatred of Nein Engels and guests is legendary."

"Don't both of you start makin' things up. How 'bout fillin' me in on this incident instead?"

"The one about Archs RDC? Or the *Qinghu* from last night?"

"Both of 'em were on the news. What I'm interested in is the death. Y'know, the one about that Buster. You two handled that one, right?"

"If you mean J-Gun Maldrick, I just finished the report earlier. It came in after the news about Huang Daquan, so it took some time."

The General leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, and suddenly showed his teeth in a smile.

"I've got a bad feelin' about this. On the same night a big shot Nein Engel dies, Hong Kong's top Buster falls from the sky and dies. …Is Akira still not here?"

HK-YARD

"I had her take the day off until noon since I had her show up last night when she was off duty."

"Well, that's too bad."

The General gave the bitter smile of someone who found the person waiting for them was not there.

"Do you need Akira for something?" asked Kouga.

"Just a little somethin'. On my way here, the folks at Aberdeen said some of 'em saw an Earth Serpent out at sea last night."

"An Earth Serpent?"

Kouga tilted his head, so Rin explained.

"It's a powerful Live form associated with the earth. The great beast takes an Octave of over 20,000,000 to control, so you could almost call it a fantasy. It's one of the Death Technos of Tuning."

"Well, there haven't been any records of a dragon showin' up in about a century and an Earth Serpent would appear below Hong Kong, not out at sea. They probably saw it wrong."

"J-Gun was a Buster, so he wouldn't be able to create a dragon."

"I was hopin' to ask Akira if she knows anyone who could do somethin' like that. Do you, Rin?"

"I'm the most powerful one I know and I can only control an Octave of 320,000. As you well know."

She shook her head.

The General nodded and scratched his head with a thin smile on his lips.

"Well, if Akira was too busy to be makin' that dragon, I really do feel like somethin' bad's gonna happen."

Part 2

It was just before noon on the seventy-second floor of the Archs RDC headquarters building.

One wall of the hall was entirely covered with windows which gave a sense of vertigo unique to elevated areas.

Several chairs were lined up in a row. The chairs were pointed in different directions and papers covered in lots of typed text were scattered over the thick carpet.

Earlier, a press conference on Archs RDC President Huang Daquan had been held here.

Once the press conference had ended, the reporters packed inside had all left.

Only one person remained in the room. A six-winged Nein Engel sat in a chair in the center of the floor as he stared out the window.

He was the Seraph who had been on Beaufort Island the night before.

He held a multi-page report and looked down on the city of Hong Kong.

His eyes moved.

First, he saw a large park in Kowloon.

Next, it was the buildings of the coastal Tsim Sha Tsui area.

His gaze moved across the sea to Hong Kong Island's Central business district.

Lastly, he looked to Hong Kong Cave in the center of Hong Kong Island. The deep hole looked like a giant had dug it for fun.

"It all starts with Hong Kong Cave."

As he spoke, he heard a quiet noise behind him.

It was only the sound of the elevator arriving, so it was not worth turning around.

“I’ve finished settling things on my end, Double Lee.”

The Nein Engel did turn around once his Urban Name had been called.

Two other Nein Engels stood in front of the elevator in a corner of the hall.

One was a Galgallin. Befitting of a combat Nein Angel, his tall body had been almost entirely remade into an assault Custom Body.

No wings stuck out from the back of his black combat jacket. If not for the unique shape of his Custom Body, he would have been indistinguishable from a human.

The other was a female Nein Engel. She wore a suit and had four wings.

She was one of the Cherubim said to control light in the Bible.

She lightly brushed a hand through her brown hair which was cut at shoulder length.

“After all the work Master Huang put into making it, this means the end of Archs RDC, doesn’t it? Come to think of it, we were the only Nein Engels working here. If only we’d brought more here.”

“There is no helping that now. We simply have to continue on as Master Huang decided. Double Lee, what do you plan to do? The four ADs used in the ceremonies are one thing, but we have lost our method of creating the final one.”

Double Lee stood.

“True. I do think I made a bit of a mistake last night. I also lost one bottle of the blood taken from Master Huang’s body. Genius, I’m sorry about what happened to J-Gun.”

Her brown-spotted wings moved a bit when she heard that.

"It doesn't really matter." She took a breath. "He's just a human, so he couldn't enter heaven anyway. And I once saw a picture of his old lover. …She looked a lot like me."

She touched her short hair as she spoke.

Double Lee shrugged when he noticed that action.

"Oh, dear. It seems I've offended you. What about you, Fei?"

The Galgallin's false eyes glowed red behind his mirrorshades.

"I ordered the guard unit to leave. Even if other corporations gather, there is no clear target to protect here. I have written letters of recommendation for all of the personnel. For foreign corporations."

Double Lee put the report he held into his pocket.

"What a pain. I was reading through Master Huang's notes. Looking at it again, he really gave us one hell of an order upon his death."

"Yes. If it hadn't been for his abnormal aging, he probably could have used a different method."

"Restoring heaven, hm? Double Lee, how is your sister? Does she know about this?"

Fei's question brought a sudden change to Double Lee's expression. It grew dark.

He must have noticed himself because he soon lowered his head.

"Hmm."

He gave a forced groan of thought and looked back up. By that time, his expression was back to normal.

"Akira probably hasn't noticed. She's no different from a human."

“She left Hong Kong Cave and joined the Yard instead of Archs RDC, right? That’s pretty amazing,” said Genius.

“It’s obvious she is being persecuted, though. Just like your parents.”

“Fei, wasn’t it the same for your parents?”

“Perhaps, but I have lost those memories along with my emotions. I showed you the scar from my Psyche Outer surgery, didn’t I?”

“…”

After a pause, Double Lee spoke.

“Well, that persecution will end before long. …What matters now is the final Device. In other words, the fifth one J-Gun died before completing.”

“?”

“Genius, you said J-Gun had a brother, right? Could you find him?”

“I doubt that would work.”

“Why not?”

“J-Gun once said he doubted his brother could ever make a Device.”

“…? A human of the Maldrick family can’t create a Device?”

“I don’t know what he meant, but I did hear that brother has a prosthetic right hand.”

“I see,” said Double Lee with a nod.

Tuners and Busters had to touch their Devices to send their Live through it. And it had to be with a flesh-and-blood body part.

“In that case, Genius, we will have to find J-Gun’s corpse and use necromancy on him. Is that okay?”

Genius just about said something on reflex when she heard the word "necromancy", but she stopped herself.

Double Lee must have taken her silence as consent because he nodded.

"Good. You take care of the preparations."

He then began to walk toward the other two and the elevator.

"Now that we have a plan, it's time we left this place. The humans can have this company."

He took a breath and said one last thing as if speaking to himself.

"Because we will have heaven."

Act 3: Running Image (11:42)

Part 1

The morning's clear air was already gone.

Instead, the air contained the warm afternoon sun and the footsteps and voices of people moving through the streets.

Sounds of cars and trams also covered the streets.

The city was beginning to move again after finishing lunch.

That movement was especially noticeable in the Tsim Sha Tsui area of central Kowloon.

The area contained countless tourist-oriented stores near the station and it could be called the face of Hong Kong.

From the heat-filled street, the blue sky was visible between the towering buildings.

The city had the Word Color of blowing wind and its heat somewhat dulled the color of the sky.

The city's Tempo was as slow as the walking people, but it contained a powerful stepping sound.

It created a unique flow that breathed powerful life into Hong Kong.

"…"

Akira walked through that flowing Live.

When she turned from Peking Road to Nathan Road in front of Tsim Sha Tsui Station, the road opened up.

The government office was working to develop Tsim Sha Tsu, so it had none of the roadside stands or shops that Hong Kong was famous for. In Akira's opinion, that made it a bit boring.

…This isn't the city my dad told me about when I lived in Hong Kong Cave.

She walked around randomly.

She was on patrol for the Yard, so she simply walked and walked in her uniform.

She had been wandering around since morning. The only thing she carried with her was her Device spear.

She had never been the type to stay put in a building all day and, after the incident the night before, she had wanted some time to gather her thoughts.

…If only I could speak with Rin.

When she had arrived at the Yard that morning, Rin had not been there. She had asked one of the Searchers and learned Rin had only just left for home.

The General of the Tank Force had been out on some kind of job, so she had not even had anyone to chat with.

"I can't believe this."

…What was that last night?

The Buster rumored to be Hong Kong's best had fallen injured from the sky and died.

Why had that happened? How had he been so badly injured and where had he jumped from?

"I just don't know."

Of course, finding the answer from so little information would have been strange in and of itself.

Still, she stopped walking, crossed her arms, leaned against a roadside streetlight, and groaned.

"Hmm."

Not even wrapping her white wings around herself produced an answer.

Instead, she heard the Lives of the surrounding passersby.

She came back to her senses once she noticed a few of those Lives sounding in her direction.

The Lives shooting straight toward her like arrows were a pale purple with a low Tempo.

They were Lives of suspicion.

Those glimpses of suspicion also contained a Word Color similar to hostility.

"?"

Once she heard those Lives, she stopped thinking.

She looked up, corrected her wings, and looked around. The surrounding flow of people momentarily hesitated.

"…"

And the unpleasantly colored Lives vanished.

Akira paid it no heed.

She lowered her Yard uniform's hat to cover her eyes and corrected the uniform's collar.

Her eyes unemotionally reflected the street of Tsim Sha Tsui and the passersby.

"There are plenty of non-humans, so why do they find Nein Engels so strange?"

Feeling a little down, she began to walk again.

But something suddenly appeared in front of her.

It was a face.

A collision and dull pain rang through her head.

"Owwww!"

She held her forehead and crouched down. The force of the headbutt had knocked her hat to the ground, so she picked it up and faced forward.

A man was crouching down in front of her.

He was a young man in a long coat.

His straight hair stood up from his head and he seemed to be a traveler. He carried an oblong bag on his back and a large travel bag sat by his side.

The insides of his eyebrows rose as he stared at Akira.

"Ow, ow, ow. Are you okay, officer? You hit me somewhere I can't train."

His forehead was a little red, so she must have run into him pretty hard.

Akira rubbed her own forehead.

“Ow, ow, ow. Hey, you.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Watch where you’re going. And what are you anyway?”

He suddenly looked up into the sky.

“What am I, hm?”

“Eh?”

“That’s quite a philosophical question. What am I…?”

“That isn’t what I meant!”

“Eh? It isn’t?”

“Of course not! You really couldn’t tell?”

“I could, I could. I was just joking. Ha ha ha. …Hey, wait. Where are you going? Hold up.”

She turned her back and started walking away, but he suddenly stopped her.

And he happened to grab the small deformed wing on her back.

The sensation on that sensitive area was hard and cold.

The unexpected action sent a shudder up her spine that escaped as a voice.

“Hyah! …W-wait! You’re molesting me now!?”

“Molesting!? What are you talking about? All I did was touch you.”

“That’s what it means to molest someone!”

"Ehh? Th-then what about between lovers? It always pisses me off seeing them flirt, but i-is that actually a crime? Can I get after them for it?"

"It's okay if you have consent!"

"Oh, I get it. Then there's no reason to hold back here."

"No one ever said *we* were lovers!"

"Ehh? Don't be like that. I'm only touching it because it's so pretty."

She crossed her arms at that.

"Pretty? Don't think you can get out of this with flattery."

"Flattery? What, has no one ever complimented your wings before?"

"Eh?" she asked.

"That's a shame. I've never seen wings like that before, but they're a lot prettier than the ones I've seen in church paintings."

He gave her a carefree smile.

His blue eyes were smiling and Akira looked away because she felt those eyes were looking deep inside her.

She noticed her cheeks were a little warm.

She worked her ears a bit and found her own Live was embarrassed.

The Word Color was a transparent red and the Tempo resembled a quiet pulse.

…Not good, not good. He's dragging me around at his pace.

With that thought, she cleared her throat toward the ground.

When she looked at him again, she noticed something odd.

She belatedly realized she could not see his Live. She could not even see its Word Color or Tempo.

…Eh?

She quickly looked around and found she could still see the Lives of the city, the buildings, the cars, and the people.

This young man's Live was the only one she could not see.

…What is going on?

She had seen people who had "lost" their Live before.

Those were either the dead or victims of violence who had undergone Balance Fall.

This young man was neither of those.

It would be best to say he was hiding his Live.

Only a minuscule tremor escaped his body into the air.

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Hm? Oh, nothing. Don't worry about it."

Even as she answered, Akira did not remove her gaze from him.

…Who is he? If he can do this, he must be a Buster or a Tuner.

She wanted to ask, but she was naturally hesitant.

Someone's Live was their individuality. If he was hiding his, he had to have a good reason.

She looked up at him because he was about two heads taller than her.

"Come to think of it, do you need something?" she asked.

"Yeah," he answered. "I've been wondering. Are you actually a real police officer?"

…Is there such a thing as a fake police officer?

She frowned but pointed to the Yard hat on her head.

"I'm from Hong Kong Yard's Cleared division. I'm still on the lowest level, but I am an actual police officer."

He responded immediately

"That's wonderful! This must be the work of heaven!"

He suddenly hugged her.

She gave a terribly unsexy shout and slammed an uppercut into the bottom of his jaw.

"Gwoh! Wh-what do you think you're doing!?"

"That's my line, you idiot! What are you doing!?"

"It's a pretty common way of expressing your feelings when someone helps you find your way."

He took a breath before continuing.

"Then again, this was my first time to ever get lost."

"Then how could that possibly be common!?"

"Calm down, calm down. You're disturbing your Live."

Hearing that, she lowered the hand she had prepared to attack.

She then pouted her lips and spoke.

"Honestly, just tell me where you want to go and I'll help you."

"Oh, you'll act as my guide? That simplifies things."

"I can't believe you. I never said I would go with you!"

"Of course not. You won't be going *with* me. You have to lead the way."

"I don't 'have to' do anything! I am not a guide! I'm a Yard Tuner!"

Her voice grew shrill and the young man suddenly looked up to think.

After a while, he scratched his head and pulled out a traveler's pocket map.

"Um, I need to get to Canton Road in Yau Ma Tei. But going there alone would be pretty boring, so if you can take me there…"

"Hmm."

Akira looked down at the map but quickly came back to her senses.

"Hey! Why are you forcing me into this?"

"Eh? Forcing you? You're imagining things. Hey, taxi!"

The tall young man's gesture must have stood out because a yellow taxi immediately stopped in front of them. Rare for Hong Kong, the back door opened automatically.

"C'mon, let's go."

Grinning, he tugged on her hand. After two or three steps, Akira frowned.

"Wait a second! What are you plotting!?"

"Plotting? Whatever do you mean?"

He threw his travel bag in the taxi and looked to her.

She tore her hand from his and asked him a question.

"Aren't you forcing me to go with you!?"

“D-don’t be ridiculous. What part of a gentleman like me is being forceful?”

“How about everything from the top of your head to the tips of your toes!?”

As soon as she shouted back, the taxi door closed behind the young man and the taxi itself drove off.

“…”

He turned around and paused for a few seconds.

“Huh?” He tilted his head. “Now, a question for you.”

“Oh?”

“Did I ask them to carry my luggage for me?”

“You don’t know?”

“Okay, time’s up. Next contestant.”

“It was stolen, you idiot!” shouted Akira. “People commit crimes like this all the time. Look!”

She pointed at the speeding taxi with her spear.

The yellow vehicle was already about one hundred meters down the road.

It was still close enough for her to catch up if she flew. The young man looked at it and commented “oh, that thing’s moving fast”, so she performed a roundhouse kick on him.

“I’ll go get it back for you, so wait here!”

She prepared to fly, but then a great roar filled the surroundings.

Part 2

The noise was an explosion. A pure white Live instantly raced through the area.

“!”

Akira gave a shout, but her voice was drowned out.

At the same time, the taxi she was preparing to pursue hopped straight up.

Long after the great roar, a solid wind blew in from the road.

The wind’s Live had the Word Color of smoke with the red of flames mixed in and it had a damp Tempo much like a car’s engine.

All of the passersby got down on the ground.

Even Akira ducked down, but the young man alone remained standing and looked down the road.

Akira followed his gaze and saw a tank.

It was a Yard tank.

It was an English-made Grant tank with the main gun on the side instead of on a turret. To match the city of Hong Kong, the midsized tank was covered in red, blue, and yellow labels and advertisement stickers for different shops.

Someone’s upper body was sticking out of the top hatch.

“General!”

The General was checking the spot the shell hit through a pair of binoculars, but he suddenly turned toward Akira and looked at her through the binoculars.

“Ohh, what’s this? If it ain’t Akira.”

"Don't say that. …And you need to stop firing in the middle of the city."

"It's no problem. My aim's perfect and the shell's loaded with divine spell powder. No one'll die." He smiled. "But, Akira. Why're you lettin' yourself almost get kidnapped?"

"Kidnapped?"

"Accordin' to my wife, things're gettin' dangerous. You need to be careful."

"Be careful, hm?"

Akira glared at the distant taxi burning away in the flames.

…If just "being carful" causes that, what happens when he actually fights back?

She tilted her head just as the tank began to turn around. Its rubber treads scraped along the ground as it slowly turned to face the young man standing in front of her.

The diagonally-positioned gun came to a stop about thirty centimeters from his face.

If it fired, it would be a direct hit. Even if the young man dodged, he could not escape being seriously wounded by the shockwave.

But the young man made no attempt to flee and stared straight down the barrel.

"I've never seen one of these before," he calmly commented.

"You a kidnapper?" asked the General. "I'll shoot."

His words of warning caused the people on the sidewalk and in the nearby stores to run away.

Akira and the young man were the only ones left on the sidewalk and the young man looked troubled.

He scratched his head for a bit but finally turned to Akira.

“What should I do?”

“You brought this on yourself. Why don’t you stick your hand down the barrel? The tank might blow up.”

“That’s not very nice. If I did that and he fired a shell, I’d end up splattered around like something from a Hollywood movie.”

“I’m impressed you can say something like that in this situation.”

“Hey, Akira!” shouted the General. “What should I do?”

She just about told him to shoot the man with the machinegun, but she restrained herself.

“General, he isn’t a kidnapper, so don’t worry. I do think I need to lecture him a bit after this, though. …More importantly, is that taxi you shot okay?”

The flow of cars on the street had ground to a halt due to the smoking taxi in the distance.

“Ahh, if he wasn’t workin’ with a kidnapper, I probably shouldn’t’ve done that.”

“The bastard still stole my luggage, so it’s fine by me. Ha ha ha!”

“Then should I fire another one?”

“What are you two saying!? C’mon! We need to get over there!”

Akira began to walk, so the young man glanced over at the tank.

“Can I ride it? It’s my first time for this kind of thing.”

“Do whatever you want!”

He ignored Akira’s shout and hopped onto the tank with a gleeful look. Akira sighed when she saw it.

…Why did I have to meet someone so strange?

"It's rude to call people strange, you know?"

Hearing his voice, she looked back in surprise.

The tank was already moving and he had his back turned to her.

…He read my Live!?

He had read her thoughts from her Live. Instead of simply seeing her Live or reading its Message, he had directly read it as words.

That required great skill.

Not even she could do it.

…It can't be.

She motionlessly watched the tank leave, but finally began to catch up.

Part 3

Akira was the first to reach the scene. The tank carrying the young man had activated the rotating police light jury-rigged to the upper armor and it would arrive in another two or three minutes.

"Ahh, all you cars movin' around in my path? You'd better get outta the way or I'll move you myself. Got that?"

She heard the General speaking over a megaphone and occasionally heard sounds of crunching metal. That was likely when he had to "move a car himself".

Akira paid it no heed. In fact, she intentionally ignored it as she worked to organize the site of the blast.

The taxi driver had gotten lucky and survived. He seemed to have been thrown through the windshield when the shell hit.

The middle-aged driver was complaining about the pain, but Akira lightly rapped him on the head.

"Do you have any idea how wrong what you did was?"

"Ow, ow, ow…"

He groaned, but his expression changed the instant he saw her wings.

"W-wah! Why is a Nein Engel out in the city!?"

"Shut up. What's wrong with that?"

"I-it's your fault my parents were-…ow, ow!"

"Stop moving. If you don't quiet down, I can't heal you."

She began Tuning the driver.

She rotated her spear around in one hand and touched the back of his neck with her other hand.

"Don't be afraid. I can't see your Live if you are."

With that said, she focused her mind.

When she closed her eyes, she could see it and hear it.

The driver's Live was sounding out.

Its Word Color was red, its Tempo was quick, and its Message was a state of agitation. Anyone would feel like that after being injured by a shell blast.

She read his Live and its Tempo.

…Is it "ta ta ta"? Or "ta ta-ta ta-ta"? And then it repeats?

Its original color would be close to orange, but that had been disturbed and grown red and quick.

She suddenly thought of the previous young man.

…He read my Live, didn't he? Just how powerful is he? And is he a Tuner or a Buster?

But thinking about it here would not help. She shook her head and focused on picking up the driver's Live.

…Got it.

She had picked up that sound and form that could not be expressed in words. It was a lot like a flavor. Some things could not be clearly conveyed no matter how many words one used. But a Live could be expressed with a voice.

To do that, she started by calling out. This was the method her mother had once taught her. It was an ancient Chinese method of calling in Lives and Tuning them known as a Wind Up.

"Oh, you Lives of 120,000 Octave surrounding me. You murmuring of a trembling person. Can you hear my Live?"

She opened her eyes, breathed in, paused, and finally let out her Live.

It began with "la" and its Tempo continued with "la-la la-la". She accurately and purely sang the driver's original Live.

The first "la" she gave was a little off, so she calmed down and corrected it. The "la" needed to be a tad nasal.

The Device she held answered her voice and amplified it.

Her wing's trembled as she sang.

Her voice grew louder.

The Device's Live quickly expanded as if bursting.

In that instant, she stabbed the Device's spear blade into the driver's back.

"!"

In a flash, she felt resistance. The blade had touched the Live core within the driver.

She sent out her Device's Live to arrange the driver's Live. The two Lives resonated and blew away the distortion.

It took less than three seconds.

A large tremor ran through the driver's body and she removed her blade.

"I did it."

All of the scrapes and bruises had vanished from his body.

There was no mark from the blade either.

Without the distortions to his Live, his body would be in better shape than before the accident.

Akira sighed.

…Why couldn't I save that man last night?

She briefly recalled that bloody Buster. Not even she had ever healed someone that badly injured in her work for the Yard.

"Well, it worked this time. Right?"

She tapped the driver's shoulder and he collapsed from his sitting position.

Normal Tune healing was done using a different form as an intermediary like when she had broken down that *Qinghu* into cats the night before.

She had omitted that step here, so the shock of having his Live directly altered had knocked him unconscious.

…Well, it makes it easier to arrest him for theft.

As she muttered that in her heart, a shadow enveloped her.

It was cast by the tank.

“Hey, the driver alive?”

That dangerous question came from the General.

“Ahh, ahh. My luggage was blown up, wasn’t it?”

That comment came from the young man straddling the tank’s gun.

Akira stood up and looked to the taxi.

It had originally been yellow, but the paint had burned away. It was now pure white and flipped onto its roof. The spirit fuel had likely had its driving force instantly sent in reverse because the trunk had opened like a flower.

“Well, damn. There’s no crane on my Grant, so we can’t get it back without fixin’ it first.”

“That’s fine. I can Tune the taxi too while I’m at it.”

“Tuning, huh?”

Hearing the young man speak, Akira turned toward him.

He gave her a look of brooding hesitation.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that my suspicions were true.”

…Huh? What does he mean by that?

She tilted her head and he shook his hand toward her.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s nothing. More importantly, can you really fix that pile of junk?”

"I can manage. It is inorganic, after all."

Despite what she said, this would be a bit tricky.

It would have helped if it had been moving, but the taxi's Live was unchanging and settled.

Tuners could transform and fix Lives that were changing or distorted. That made it easy to Tune living things, moving things, or anything in the process of being destroyed.

But there was nothing she could do about a Live that had settled in its distorted state.

…I have no choice.

"Stand back a little. I'll use a Discord Bomb."

She pulled a black rod resembling a pencil from a hidden pocket in her tight skirt. When it exploded, it shook and slightly disturbed the Lives in a five meter radius. That created an opening for Tuning, but it was not the easiest thing to use.

It would affect unrelated Lives as well.

"Now, then."

Just as she prepared to set up the Discord Bomb, a voice reached her from above.

"Hey, are you going to destroy it?"

"This only disturbs the Live."

"Then I can help you there."

"What?"

She looked up and saw the young man standing on the tank. He held the oblong bag he had carried on his back.

He stepped along the gun and jumped down.

He landed surprisingly lightly next to her and pulled out the contents of the bag.

His gloved right hand held…

"A Device?"

The young man turned toward her and smiled.

"Yeah, you can call it that."

"Are you a Tuner? Or are you a Buster?"

"Neither. I don't like letting people see my Live."

Akira saw a brief grim look on his face when he said that, so she avoided asking any further.

"Can you really help me disturb the taxi's Live?"

"I should be able to manage that."

He gave a casual nod and approached the taxi with the Device resting on his shoulder.

"…"

He tapped his shoulder with the Device and observed the taxi. He crouched down, peered into the crushed inside, and commented, "Wow, you got this thing good."

"Heyyy! Kid, you okay?"

"General, be quiet."

She had no idea when the young man would destroy the Live, so she kept her spear at the ready.

"Hm."

He nodded and lightly tapped the taxi's chassis.

A small sound came from it.

In an instant, the taxi burst.

It was a solid sound.

"!"

The young man had not used his own Live.

He had not used the Wind Up that Akira used or the Over Up that was the standard for Tuning and Busting.

He had only used the sound of tapping the taxi's chassis.

He had instantly amplified the Live of "tapping" and used that as a great power.

The Live constructing the taxi flew through the air. Its Word Color was a yellow mixed with scarlet. Its tempo resembled the engine sound that the Live just barely remembered.

…How can he do that while ignoring the basics of Tuning and Busting?

But Akira did not have time to think. She quickly breathed in and released her Live.

She created a random Message in her mind and released it as an indescribable Live.

It had originally been a car, so she decided an energetic Tempo would be best. It was a Tempo filled with staccato.

…Okay!!

She nodded, and rotated her Device. She used the blade to scoop up the scattering ginkgo leaf pattern Lives and placed her own image on top of them.

“Oh, you Lives of 80,000 Octaves floating around me. You notification of a machine. Can you hear this?”

She sang her own Live that began with “la”. It was an energetic song that sounded like small balls bouncing about.

It took only five seconds for the Message to gather together.

The raised tip of her spear trembled and the surrounding space briefly shook.

A moment later, a very, very high pitched sound rang out.

That meant it was done.

The Live had taken its new form.

“Oh?”

The young man’s voice was filled with surprise.

His surprise was warranted because the flipped taxi at her feet was now a yellow dog.

It had originally been a taxi, so it was as tall as a child. However, it must have been a newborn because it sat at her feet and begged for attention.

“That’s amazing. That’s definitely worth some praise.”

“Why are you acting like this is so strange?”

“Well… Tuners normally create something that can attack. Like a tiger or wolf.”

It was true Lives were more easily influenced by powerful images like killer intent or intimidation.

“I thought you’d be making something more violent and dangerous.”

“Yes, well, I am a genius.”

Wondering if he had been making fun of her, she looked his way, but he was not smiling and he watched the dog with a serious look in his eyes.

…Oh, was he really praising me?

Immediately following that thought, his expression changed.

His eyebrows rose a bit and he formed a small, masculine smile. It was almost as if…

…Can you really read my Live?

But he did not answer her question. Instead, he crouched down.

"I've seen Tuning plenty of times, but this is the first time I've seen someone make a dog like this. Is it really alive?"

"I don't think it's quite alive. It's just a combination of my Message and the taxi's Message. Once the Live resonance inside it ends, it will return to its original form. And that would be the car."

That was obvious when she touched it. Its fur felt cold and metallic and the moisture in its eyes looked like glass.

It would be most accurate to call it a dog made from a car.

"Ahem, this is Hong Kong Yard. We're about to lift the traffic restriction, so could you all get back on the road like normal?"

After that announcement over the megaphone, the cars started down the road again.

They just made sure to stay away from the tank.

Akira moved in front of the tank and looked to the young man while petting the dog's head.

"But…you're pretty amazing yourself."

"Eh?"

"Don't give me that."

She looked to the road where the taxi had been. All that remained was the damage from the taxi crashing into the ground.

…The Discord Bomb would tear into the road too.

Lives normally radiated outward just like sound, but he had made sure only the taxi resonated with his Device's tone.

…How did he do that? And he can read Lives too.

She approached the young man and looked at his Device.

"This has some weird writing on it."

"Yeah, that says Nein König."

"König? Is that English?"

"It's German."

"Let me see that."

She looked at Nein König's blade. A relief of two intertwined dragons was engraved near the hilt. That had to be the Wild Emblem of his family.

Just as she touched the blade partially of curiosity, he spoke up.

"Wait. If someone with any power touches that barehanded-…!"

"What?"

A small Live sounded out.

A direct Live with the sharpness of a blade carried into the distance.

Shocked, Akira looked toward the destination of the Live. Past the various stores and even further north than Yau Ma Tei and Mong Kok, she saw a group of buildings.

Archs RDC stood at the center of those buildings and Hong Kong's mountains were visible in the background. They looked small from where Akira was, but they had to be at least one hundred stories tall.

…*No, that's not possible.*

"It could never reach that far."

Suddenly, smoke rose from that direction.

"Ohh, that's impressive. You tore into the mountain."

That comment came from the General who rubbed the scar on his cheek.

Akira felt all color leave her face.

"W-wait! Why are you carrying around such a dangerous Device!?"

"Ah! I told you not to touch it!"

It was already too late.

The young man made a mistake when he spun the Device around to hide it.

With a wind-like sound, all of the glass in the shops along Nathan Road shattered.

The glass turned into a spray of pure white dust.

A moment later, the spray transformed into feathers in accordance with Akira's subconscious Message when she touched the Device.

The destruction propagated at the speed of sound.

Even the windows of the cars on the road turned to feathers with a well-regulated Tempo.

"…!"

As the afternoon sun washed over Nathan Road, it was filled with a soft white spray like someone had dumped buckets of water over it.

And the process repeated again and again as it moved further and further away.

“Ahh, ahh. That was your fault, Akira.”

“Wait. Don’t use my Urban Name without permission.”

“Oh? Oh? Are you trying to distract me from what just happened?”

“No! I’m used to writing out official apologies.”

After insisting something she was far from proud of, she looked to the young man.

He was a traveler, he used a strange kind of Busting, and he possessed a ridiculous Device.

“Who are you anyway?”

“Come to think of it, I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I?”

“No, you haven’t! You’ve been moving from one thing to another since I met you!”

“Is that so?” he said. “Well, don’t worry. I don’t mind.”

“I mind!”

“Oh, you want to know about me that badly? Have you fallen for- ow! N-not there!”

“I’ll stab you in the gut next time. Now, identity yourself! And you don’t get a choice in the matter!”

“I’m… I’m just a perfectly normal person. …Gwaah! Who jabs someone with a device!?”

“Don’t worry. I used the back of the blade.”

"You can't jab with the back of the blade!"

The young man finally sighed in resignation.

He lowered his shoulders a little and spoke.

"You can call me Gunmal. That's only my Urban Name, though."

"What?"

That was the Urban Name of the man who had died before her eyes the night before.

This other Gunmal turned toward her blank look and narrowed his eyes.

…Is he reading my Live?

Her heart shrank down.

His expression softened and he apologized before saying more.

"I'm here in Hong Kong to see my brother. But then I happened across a police officer who just so happened to be thinking about him, so I thought I would read a little more of her Live."

"And you ended up headbutting me? …So you really can read Lives."

"It's no different from your Tuning. And if you don't want me reading your Live, you should be more reserved in your thoughts. They call that Closed Words in England."

He rubbed the dog's throat, stood up, and asked her something.

"My brother's dead, isn't he?"

"Eh?"

"I saw it in your Live."

His expression was neither dark nor bright and she still could not see his Live.

Part 4

The moon had risen to the top of the sky.

The ruins of Kowloon Walled City were on a small hill in the center of Hong Kong, so they gave a good view of the moon.

Not much remained of the large flat walled city. The moonlight only showed walls without ceilings and a forest of faded stone columns.

Two people stood within that forest.

One was Rin.

The other was the young man named Gunmal.

They sat facing each other on broken columns and they looked into the city of Hong Kong.

They were occasionally lit up by something other than the moonlight because Gunmal was smoking a cigarette.

He had already gone through five of those small lights since sitting down.

He threw away yet another one and it vanished after bouncing off the ground.

At the same time, the wind blew through.

The wind came from the ocean, so it smelled of saltwater.

Rin opened her mouth as if responding to the blowing wind.

“Sorry you had to visit the catacombs so soon after arriving in Hong Kong.”

She looked to the metal hatch embedded in the ground behind Gunmal. That was the entrance to the Yard’s morgue.

“I knew about the underground space below Kowloon left after the Second Divine Punishment War, but I’m surprised to see it’s being used for this.”

There was no hint of sadness in Gunmal’s voice and no stiffness in his expression.

“Well, I’m thankful I at least got to see my brother this way.”

“Were you here to see him?”

“I explained that when you questioned me, didn’t I? I was here for his wedding, but all I found was his funeral. Since I’m already here, I guess I’ll do some sightseeing.”

“If you want to drink, I’ll join you.”

“I don’t have time for that. This city looks pretty interesting. It’s British territory so it has a door to the same heaven as Aerial City and there are both Glossolalians and humans on the surface. Even sleeping feels like a waste of time.”

He smiled and added “I reserved a room for a whole month.”

“Are you planning to look into your brother’s death?” asked Rin.

His expression did not even budge at the blunt question.

“I dunno.”

He sounded casual, so Rin sighed.

She looked him in the eye as if trying to see something there and spoke.

“I think Akira has the night shift tomorrow, so rely on her if something happens during the day. …I feel like the two of you will get along.”

“Get along?”

"Both of you have a unique feel to you. And since you're from the direct line of the Maldrick family, I assume you're pretty talented."

"Can you see my Live?"

"Don't worry. I may have an official Tuning education, but not even I can see it. …This is about what my instincts tell me."

"Talented, huh?" He smiled bitterly. "Please stop using that word."

"Why?"

"Busting and Tuning are a killer's profession. It's the same here in Hong Kong, isn't it? You've fought several Divine Punishment Wars against China or the Nein Engels and it had to have been Busters and Tuners at the center of the fighting."

A brief silence fell.

“You’re right about that. It was true of my parents and my grandfather.”

Rin thought for a bit and nodded.

She met Gunmal’s gaze before asking another question.

“You said you intend to quit Busting after you destroy J-Gun’s Device here in Hong Kong, didn’t you?”

She sighed.

“That will be the end of Europe’s top Busting family. And the Maldrick family only took that position from the Borderson family fifty years ago.”

Gunmal said nothing and looked up into the sky with a slight smile.

Rin looked up as well.

Perhaps drawn by the city lights, a single dove was flying south even though it was night.

Gunmal spoke quietly while watching the dove.

“That’s because Busting is boring.”

“?”

“You can’t even make a single bird. All you can make are ugly weapons.”

“Really? I think both Busting and Tuning have their interesting sides.”

She answered on reflex and almost seemed to be making an excuse, so he suddenly looked back at her.

“Do you really think that?”

“Why do you ask?”

“A Message sometimes leaks out of your Live.”

She looked to him in surprise, but his eyes were closed and his hand was on his forehead.

“I’m sensitive to other people’s Lives.”

“I see. Then I guess you read that I used to be so full of myself I thought I could make a dragon.”

“A dragon? You mean one of the three secret techniques of Tuning and Busting?”

“Yes, but ever since the texts on it were lost during the Fifth Divine Punishment War, you only ever hear about it in Peking opera or from Akira.”

Rin gave a self-deprecating smile.

“Also, I’ve lost sight of why I wanted to Tune in the first place. I’m so busy that I just don’t have the time. …And about five years ago, I realized you need wings to fly.”

“Wings, huh?”

Gunmal paused for a moment.

“Her wings are so pretty.”

“You mean Akira’s?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she is a Nein Engel.”

He started to say something, but stopped and asked something else instead.

“A Nein Engel?”

“It’s Hong Kong slang. There didn’t used to be many of them, but about forty years ago, the angels were nearly wiped out by a bacteriological

weapon in the Fourth Divine Punishment War. To leave behind some descendants, a lot of them began procreating with humans."

"I see. And the person you're searching for is one of those Nein Engels."

Her expression changed at that.

It stiffened.

"Why do you know about that?"

"During a break in the questioning, I met Akira at the Yard's restaurant. She told me while we were eating."

"The Yard's restaurant? You mean the Human Meat Bar?"

"Yeah. She was busy putting together her written apology at the time, so we promised to drink there later. …You want to join us?"

"No thanks. That place is meant for Glossolalians. They even serve rocks for Rockbiters." She crossed her arms. "But Akira does have a bad habit of talking too much"

"She was worried about the person you're looking for. She said Nein Engels tend to be persecuted in this city, so I would guess your story has something to do with that too."

"We just happened to be moving in different directions. And don't dig too deeply into my personal issues."

A slight seam appeared in the stiffness of her expression.

That seam gave a glimpse of darkness below.

Gunmal must have seen it because he clapped his hands to change the general mood.

"Well, don't get too mad at her."

"Hm? Have you fallen for her? If so, you'll need the General's permission."

"Is he her father?"

"No, but he's an old acquaintance of her father. When she came here three years ago, the General took her to meet her father on his deathbed. I was there too to tend to him," she explained. "He may not look it, but he's a decent Tuner. He wandered in from who knows where and saved everyone during the Fourth Divine Punishment War."

"Oh? Sounds like I've got a decent rival on my hands."

"Are you serious about going after Akira?"

He nodded.

"Yeah. She's a good girl. She never said it out loud, but her Live apologized over and over for not saving my brother. She really is a good girl. But…"

"?"

"It's still too soon for me to fall for her. …After all, I don't like Tuners."

With that said, he stood.

His eyes looked down into the city lights far below.

Act 4: Corresponding Pair (7:11)

Part 1

Mong Kok's Ladies' Street was busy even early in the morning.

That shopping district was filled with stores for women and a single Live dominated the area.

"Shopping!"

That was everything.

Hong Kong's return to China was only half a month away, but the city showed no sign of decline.

That may have been because the current system would continue for fifty years after the return. Or perhaps they were confident they could move to some other land even if they lost their stores.

At first glance, no one would suspect the return was so near.

But a closer examination showed posters put up around the streets.

They said things like, "Attention! Find great bargains at the night festival celebrating the coming return to China!"

To the people living in the city, the change of ownership was apparently nothing more than an excuse for a festival

Excitement was clearly filling the city as the event drew near.

The city's Live performance grew day by day and it would occasionally give off a sharp, firecracker-like Live.

This was a problem for anyone sensitive to Lives.

"Can't they keep it down?" complained Akira while lying in her apartment's bed.

She had the night shift today, so she had to leave at six PM. It had only been one the last time she had checked the clock, so she wanted to sleep some more if she could.

…I drank way too much last night.

After the General had taken her back in his tank, she had been stuck writing one hundred pages of written apologies for destroying Tsim Sha Tsui so spectacularly.

Partway through, she had taken a dinner break and eaten with Gunmal as he briefly skipped out on his questioning.

After finishing the written apologies, she had left to go drinking with Gunmal who had returned from the catacombs.

After eating, drinking, and enjoying herself, she had cheerfully parted ways with him at past five in the morning.

…I feel like I spent all day yesterday complaining to him.

Remembering it cleared her head. Reality returned to her senses.

The white sensation of the sheets felt good on her bare skin.

She always slept in the nude. In the past, she had worn special Nein Engel pajamas with a hole in the back, but she had not liked how they felt.

…And anything that covers the wings is out of the question.

With that thought, she gently moved her wings.

That pushed away the blanket covering her.

"Ugh."

That seemed to be telling her to get up.

…Come to think of it, I haven't been taking time out for morning training recently.

She had watched what her mother did when she was younger and started training her Tuning every morning.

When washing her face, she would Tune the water flowing from the tap.

She would make birds or beasts from the water and blow life into them.

Even if it was simply training, it was no easy task. Even now, she sometimes ended up with water covering the room.

…If I keep doing that…I won't end up like mom or dad.

To ensure that, she had to gain even more skill than she had now.

And if she did that…

…I can send out a dragon, heal the city, and bring everyone together. And…

"Right."

She remembered the night before last.

She remembered feeling the death of J-Gun's Live as she held his hand.

His Word Color and Tempo had vanished and grown clear. It had all been replaced with death.

She had seen it with her eyes, heard it with her ears, and felt it in her heart.

It had felt like eliminating the refreshing side of water and being left with something heavy, flowing, and impossible to grab.

She subconsciously clenched her fist and felt that same sensation inside it.

…If that happens again…will I be able to save them?

At that point, she felt a chill that seemed to sap her of all strength.

"No!"

She reflexively sat up to shake off that chill.

"…"

She was out of breath.

She started to sink deep into the Italian bed she had splurged on, but she let out a long sigh and restrained herself from going back to sleep.

She rested her head on her hand and faced forward.

She saw Gunmal there.

He was reading a newspaper that he must have bought on the roadside.

“Hi. Good morning.”

In place of a greeting, her reflexes threw a kick back at him.

Part 2

Hong Kong’s municipal office was in the Kowloon administrative district.

The old brick building had one major characteristic: it did not trust the people.

That was immediately obvious upon entering. The counter between the lobby and the clerks was covered with ten centimeter thick bulletproof glass colored blue so no one could see inside. The exchange of documents was carried out through a small hole in the gap between glass and counter.

Similarly, all fifteen of the data lookup computers in one corner of the lobby were thoroughly chained down.

Gunmal and Akira were at one of those computers looking up some information.

“Don’t blame me for that one. Rin told me to ask you for help with this kind of thing. I didn’t mean any harm.”

“Anyone would view that as harmful, you pervert!”

Akira’s Device leaned up against the desk and she looked over at Gunmal.

“Don’t give me that angry look,” he responded. “And who are you calling a pervert? Well?”

"You. Think carefully about what you did."

"Fine, but you explain yourself logically first."

"You entered my room without permission and watched me sleep. And while I was naked too. How about that?"

"Hmm. You sure do like to argue."

"What!? You're the one that asked me to explain it!"

He gestured with his hand as if to say he understood.

"So to not be a pervert, instead of watching you sleep, I should've touched you?"

"No! That makes you even more of a pervert!"

She raised her wings in anger and Gunmal gave an exaggerated show of being flustered.

"Th-then what am I supposed to do?"

"Don't force your way into my room! Your very first step was wrong!"

"I couldn't help that. And I didn't force my way in. The doors just opened on its own. They have a way of doing that when you break the lock."

"You just casually confessed to something insane, didn't you?"

"Don't worry about it. I made sure to give your landlord a present."

It was now Akira's turn to be flustered.

"W-wait! What's this about my landlord and a present?"

"Since I'm a young man visiting a young woman, I thought I should at least bring a box of sweets and give a quick greeting."

"Wait. What kind of greeting?"

"Just that they'd probably be seeing a lot of me from- ow!"

A powerful elbow jab sent Gunmal tumbling from his chair.

"Owww! What's wrong with seeing you naked? It's not like it hurts you or anything. Besides, your breasts were pretty bi-…"

"Don't say that so loudly!"

She frantically covered his mouth and looked around to find everyone in the large lobby – whether in flashy casual clothes or business suits – was looking at the two of them.

"…"

They likely all had their own thoughts on the matter.

While looking at Akira and Gunmal, they all sighed and then returned to what they had been doing.

Akira frowned at the Live Message that came with that sigh.

"Um, we really drew a lot of attention just- hyah!"

Akira shrieked, grabbed her palm, and drew back.

Meanwhile, Gunmal wet his lips with his tongue.

"Looks like you used too much oyster sauce to season your breakfast. And are your hands dried out?"

"No, they are not! And what was that all of a sudden!? You really are a pervert!"

"A pervert? That's just being rude to my gourmet spirit."

He then sighed and continued in a tone that made it clear he was ready to end this.

"Besides, you didn't refuse when I entered your room."

"I can't refuse when I'm asleep!"

He crossed his arms and thought deeply.

After a while, he announced his conclusion.

"I see. So if you're asleep, I have a blank check to do whatever I want."

"No, you don't, idiot! I know you can read my Live, so pay more attention!"

"…"

"What? Do you have something to say?"

"You had better remember thi- ow!"

She kneed him.

He fell from the chair again and she turned aside to pretend she did not know him.

…Why do I have to deal with this idiot?

Gunmal would be able to read her exaggerated thought.

"Rin really is shoving extra work onto me."

"What's wrong with this? Getting data on my brother is part of the investigation, isn't it?"

The Maldrick family had sent over data on J-Gun the night before, but they still needed the data from his life in Hong Kong.

That data was in the municipal office's databank, so someone had to visit the municipal office when it was open and sit at a computer like they were doing.

"If we don't have time, we can always ask Rin to get it for us, though."

After a few more comments back and forth, they began the search.

"That just leaves the address… Hey, Gunmal. Why did you decide to gather the data? This may not be the best way to put it, but you could have left it all to the Yard."

"I want to finish up the job my brother left for me."

"What job?"

He paused for two or three beats before answering.

"Destroying his Device."

He said it lightly while holding out the envelope with J-Gun's address written on it.

She took the manila envelope.

"Why would you destroy his Device?"

He gave a fake-sounding groan of thought, suddenly looked her in the eye, and spoke too quietly for anyone but her to hear.

"To put it simply, because people will die."

Part 3

Gunmal's answer was so short and simple that Akira was slow to react.

…*So*…

She placed the envelope on the desk and took a breath.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"As a Tuner, you must know the history of Tuning and Busting."

"But what about that history?"

"Tuning and Busting are techniques to destroy the world. Busters destroy Lives and Tuners can only act as healers to support those Busters. The gentle and Tuner-oriented Wind Up used to be at the base

of it all, but now the simplified Over Up used by Busters is the standard, right?"

"…"

They both looked away from the other.

That created a gap in the time and the sound.

The silence was enough to emphasize the surrounding noise and it continued for a little while.

But before it could grow awkward, Akira spoke.

"So because of that past…"

She hesitated before quietly asking her question.

"You're going to destroy that Device?"

He nodded once.

"With a powerful Device, both Busters and Tuners will end up killing-…"

Before he could finish, a great sound came from his cheek.

"!?"

The solid sound gathered the attention of the surrounding people once more.

Akira felt their Lives of curiosity stabbing into her body, but she ignored it.

She did not care.

Instead, she spoke without looking him in the eye.

"Gunmal, do you really think that?"

He did not answer.

“Do you think I’m that kind of person too?”

She regretted the words as soon as she spoke them.

…That was too much. I got carried away.

This would only escalate things further.

Another slight silence fell and nothing but awkwardness filled it, so she frantically opened her mouth.

“I’m sorry.”

She meaninglessly apologized on her own, nodded, and continued.

“I-I’m a little sorry. I want to calm down, so I’m going to step outside for a-…”

She stood, but a tug came at her hand.

“…”

She turned around to find Gunmal’s gloved right hand holding her hand.

He immediately looked her in the eye and scratched his head with his other hand.

“Sorry.”

He gave a one word apology.

His hand felt hard and cold through his glove and she finally realized something about him.

…His right hand is a prosthetic.

The hand inside the glove was a machine, so it did not send out a Live or anything else. But this was enough to tell Akira she had relaxed.

“…”

…He must have his reasons.

She still could not see his Live.

"Okay."

She nodded for no reason and sat back down.

She then resumed the search.

In only took a few seconds.

Once they started, they found J-Gun's citizen data right away.

"The Yard's name is pretty powerful, isn't it?"

"Y-yes, it is."

Once he finally spoke again, she quickly agreed with him.

She also typed on the keyboard.

"Should I get a printout for you?"

She turned to ask and saw a red mark on his cheek. She could vaguely make out the shape of her hand.

…Oh, dear.

She sighed in her heart just as the printer on the side of the desk began spitting out paper.

"My brother hadn't been working for about the last three months. He was paying a fixed amount of taxes."

"Will this data help?"

"Who knows. But this is no surprise when it comes to my stupid brother."

There was not a hint of ill will on Gunmal's face.

Akira breathed a sigh of relief and smiled a little.

"He must have been a good brother. …Unlike mine. All we ever did was fight."

"I'd say that's a nice sibling relationship, too. …What's your brother doing now?"

"I don't know. I was the only one our mom trained as a Tuner. He had apparently self-taught himself Tune Emblems, but I don't know what he's been doing since reaching an Octave of 160,000."

"Tune Emblems? That's unusual."

She nodded and gave an additional comment.

"Rumor has it my parents were amazing Tuners. They could supposedly control an Octave in the tens of millions. They apparently met about twenty years ago and retired after having my brother."

"I see. So your parents taught you. …That would explain why you slapped me."

"That isn't what I was taught Tuning is for and it isn't what I think it's for."

"Then what *do* you think it's for?"

He asked in a teasing tone, so she thought about it and gave a short answer.

"That's a secret."

"It's a secret?"

She shrugged.

"I used to tell everyone, but no one believed me."

She kept her Live as restrained as possible so he could not read her thoughts.

"And I don't want to make it look cheap."

"Makes sense."

Gunmal looked down at the paperwork and sighed a comment.

"They must have been good parents."

"Eh?"

"I saw the photo in your room and I could tell. Especially your dad."

"He looks like the General, doesn't he?"

"Eh?"

"Like the scar on the cheek."

That seemed to give Gunmal a sudden thought.

"Yeah, they do have similar scars. …Is it a sign of something?"

"I don't know, but my dad would laugh and say something cryptic about it being Hong Kong's most important scar."

"I see." Gunmal nodded. "Hey, this may be sudden, but what if I said I wanted to see you Tune?"

"Eh?"

The sudden question confused her and he turned toward her.

"How is your Tuning different from the Tuning I know?"

Part 4

Hong Kong Cave was a large hole.

It was a massive pit about a kilometer across and three kilometers deep. When standing on the edge, the other edge was so distant it felt like a cliff.

But it was more than just a large hole.

The inside wall of the hole was divided into layers about ten meters thick to form three hundred stories of residential areas. This was a “manmade hole”.

But man had long since abandoned it.

The pit sank down below the dark night and it was almost entirely blocked off by reinforced concrete barricades. Avoiding those and descending below would reveal two facts.

First, most of the three hundred stories of residences were unused.

And second, the only people inside were Nein Engels.

Even they were not a common sight. The only signs of them were a few lit houses on the inside of the cylindrical cave.

Following those lights down would eventually bring the bottom level into view. It was a stone-paved space about one hundred meters across.

It resembled a park lit by torches.

It was three kilometers below ground and the barricades covering the top of the hole prevented any sunlight from reaching it even during the day. The park was filled with moss instead of trees, but even that could not just grow as it pleased. It was maintained into something like a yard.

If there was moss, there had to be water.

No water could be heard, but it could be smelled. There was a pond in the center of the park.

It was a Western-style pond surrounded by stone.

A single monument stood to the side of the pond. When compared to the pristine stone paving, the monument looked intentionally aged and mossy, but the reason for that could be read in the inscription.

“1842. Blocked by the water, the construction of the cave will end here.”

Below that, the Flight Song was inscribed.

“彼街通天地

墜朝地仰雲

昇夜空謳月

惟望再笑君”

The first inscription had a name underneath it, but the Flight Song’s author had been chipped away for some reason.

But comparing the two inscriptions suggested the Flight Song had also been inscribed there in 1842.

That was the year Hong Kong had become British territory.

Evan after approximately a century and a half, the pond still had water.

There was no sign of the water flowing away, but it was not overflowing the stone either. It had likely come up from below just like a well.

The pond’s water was clear. It must have been moving because it would sometimes ripple a bit.

A single white feather rocked as it floated in one of those ripples.

It was a Nein Engel’s feather.

Three Nein Engels were gathered by the pond.

The six-winged Seraph named Double Lee sat on the stones.

He flipped through some documents and read them by the torchlight while looking at Genius and Fei who stood in front of him.

"I see. Even as a crumbling corporation, it can still be useful. And you say J-Gun's younger brother has arrived in Hong Kong?"

"J-Gun called him here. To, well…"

"Attend his marriage with you?"

Genius frowned at Double Lee's comment.

"No, not that. He had always had his brother destroy the attack Devices he created."

"If that is why he is here, he is our enemy. We must kill him."

"Yes, but from the picture, he looks like your average good-natured person. Also, he was eliminated from the Maldrick family's records and he keeps his Wild Name hidden, so he seems to have been driven out of the family."

"Well, a one-handed Buster *would* be useless," concluded Double Lee.

He stroked each of his six wings.

"With 622 Nein Engels in total, I cannot believe that we are the only ones with no deformities who are willing to risk our lives for this mission."

"Double Lee, that isn't the only reason you're the leader."

"I know that. That has more to do with the technique I inherited from my parents. And if I had never joined Archs RDC, I would have only ever thought they were normal Tuners."

He gave a meaningful smile and reached for the monument next to the pond.

"Hong Kong Cave was built by man, but the Nein Engels will use it to ascend into heaven. This city truly does connect heaven and earth."

"Another one of your interpretations of the Flight Song? You always have been obsessed with that song."

"Yes. Even now that I know its significance, I am still obsessed with it."

"It only seems like a nice song to me," said Genius.

"I will tell you everything eventually," quietly answered Double Lee. "But it is a shame. …Just as Master Huang said, Nein Engels and humans won't be able to smile together. It's no different from one hundred and fifty years ago."

"History here is filled with unfortunate events. After the biological weapon was released here during the Second Divine Punishment War, angels just so happened to have a better resistance than humans or your average Glossolalian, but that led to suspicion and retribution during the Fourth Divine Punishment War. Who do you think made the vaccine back then?"

"The excellent are always targets of envy."

With a gritty sound, Double Lee tore the moss from the monument.

"We cannot get along with humans as well as most demons and monsters, but we are not revered like an angel who has just descended from heaven either. We are…"

He swallowed his last words and tossed aside the moss in his hand.

The damp moss fell in the pond, producing a small splash and ripples.

Suddenly, Fei spoke quietly.

"Someone's there."

Double Lee and Genius turned to the Galgallin in mirrorshades.

He gently pointed at the back of his neck.

“Double Lee, someone has arrived at one your three ceremony locations.”

“Which one?”

“The southwestern one on Lamma Island. They are definitely investigating us.”

“Oh? They are skilled enough to have sniffed us out already?”

Fei nodded and concluded what they had to do in just a few words.

“We must fight.”

Act 5: Series of Phenomena (14:11)

Part 1

It was ten PM, the border between night and late night.

Hong Kong Yard was a bit busy because the second night shift was arriving to replace the first.

Akira had started working at six and she had returned from her patrol for some office work.

However, she now stood next to Rin’s desk in her patrol outfit.

Gunmal stood next to her and they both looked to Rin.

“I see. You want to spend the night shift out on patrol instead of in the office…and you want to go with Gunmal?”

“That’s right. If she’s with me, she won’t get lost.”

“That’s my line. You’re the one who was lost when I met you yesterday.”

“Quiet, both of you. …I don’t mind if you work together and Gunmal might find a key to the J-Gun case, so it could help our investigation. But…”

"But?"

"Get permission from Cleared Chief Yong. You get involved in our division too much, Akira."

"But Cleared only lets me clean up the city. …And Rin, you can Tune better than anyone else in Cleared, so you should join us."

Rin did not answer and changed the subject.

"Anyway, you need to take this up with your actual boss, not me."

"I told the General about it, so it'll probably reach him."

"Probably doesn't cut it. …And the General is too easy on you."

…Is he?

Gunmal must have read her thought because he spoke up.

"The General is that old guy with the tank, right? The one from the Fourth Divine Punishment War."

"Yes, he may not look it, but he's a hero known throughout Hong Kong. Normally, he would have a private office and command the entire Yard, but he insists on working alongside the rest of us."

"What a nice old man."

"Gunmal, you couldn't read his Live, could you?"

He gave a small embarrassed smile.

"You could tell? I could see his Word Color, though."

"Eh? Eh? You could do that with the General's?"

Akira's eyes opened in surprise because she was not powerful enough to read his Live, but Rin quickly cut in.

"Like I was saying, you need to take this seriously."

"C-c'mon, Gunmal. She's talking about you."

"I'm pretty sure she's talking about you."

"I'm talking about both of you."

Rin sighed and reached for a paper on her desk.

"What's that?"

"A montage. It has to do with you two, so take a look."

…*?*

Akira did as she was told and saw a drawing of a woman's face.

She had a slender face and well-shaped eyes.

Akira succinctly expressed her thoughts.

"She has me beat."

"Hm? What was that?'

"Nothing. Just talking to myself."

Akira looked back at the drawing of the woman and read the Live contained within.

The lines and shading expressed a Message containing the thoughts of the drawer, not the depicted person.

…*Her hair is long and brown.*

…*She is beautiful and her eyes are clear yet sad.*

…*She has a Caucasian facial structure.*

And…

"Is this person a Nein Engel?"

"Looks like it."

Gunmal and Rin both nodded.

"Come to think of it, my brother said something in his letter about maybe getting married. Is this the woman?"

"I don't know that much, but Kouga's investigation has revealed that she visited J-Gun's house quite a few times. …Do either of you know her?"

"I…"

…*Do I?*

"I don't think I ever met her when I lived in Hong Kong Cave."

"My brother never told me the woman's name."

"I see."

Rin nodded again and there was no hue of disappointment in her expression or Live. She must not have expected anything in the first place.

Frustrated by that, Akira looked down at the drawing again.

"What do you think about that long hair?" she muttered.

"Eh? I like it," answered Gunmal.

"That's not what I meant. …It's possible she's cut her hair."

"Why would she?" asked Rin.

Akira looked up at Rin's long braided hair.

"You let your hair grow out, but that isn't because you're lazy, is it?"

"Eh? What are you talking about?"

…It's called women's intuition.

"It's a mystery."

"Hm."

Gunmal nodded and suddenly looked to the clock on the wall.

It was already ten.

"Shouldn't we be going?"

"You're right. Rin, we'll be leaving, okay? Sorry we weren't any help."

"Don't worry about it. More importantly, make sure you do what I told you to. …Oh, and Gunmal."

"?"

"We should finish our investigation of J-Gun's house tonight, so you can visit it tomorrow."

"Okay."

He smiled and lightly raised a hand in parting.

At the same time, the phone on Rin's desk rang.

…Who is that?

Akira turned around before leaving and she could tell who it was from Rin's tone of voice when she answered.

It was Kouga.

"She seems busy," said Gunmal.

Akira nodded.

There was indeed a lot they had to do.

Part 2

Lights of fishing boats could be seen in the distance.

The ocean wind carried the sounds of waves from far below.

Repeated splashes could be heard from below as well.

While soaking his feet in those sounds, Kouga walked alone through the moonlit night.

His voice joined the sounds of the waves and wind.

“Yeah, I’m on Lamma Island right now. I can really see the lights of Hong Kong Island since I’m up on a mountain.”

The wind quickly swept away his voice as he spoke into his cellphone.

The wind carried the saltiness of the ocean below.

Lamma Island was just over three kilometers long and its tallest mountain was three hundred fifty meters. The powerful ocean wind flew over the forest and raced up the mountain ridge.

Not even the locals approached this place.

“But it’s strange. Why was the blood of Archs RDC’s president spilled here? Do you have any idea? …Yeah, I still have to visit Tsing Yi Island and Beaufort Island.”

Meanwhile, a small form rode the wind and flew down through the darkness.

The moonlight illuminated its two wings.

It was a bat.

When Kouga casually reached out his right hand, it landed on his white fingertips and vanished.

It had combined with him.

He gently swung his right hand and brushed it through his pompadour.

“I’m almost at the peak. I’m gonna start some real investigation, so I’ve gotta hang up. …Right. I’ll be careful.”

He ended the call and put the phone in his pocket.

He continued up the steep slope without getting out of breath and the slope suddenly vanished.

A flat space about the size of a small park appeared.

This was the peak.

Some volcanic rock protruded out of it, but it was relatively level and as flat as a stage. Perhaps due to the powerful wind, there were no trees to obstruct one’s view.

“You could probably land a helicopter here.”

Kouga looked around. As a vampire and human mix, he could see in the dark. The darkness of the night was not an obstacle for him. It was his ally.

“The north and south sides are sheer cliffs. I can see why he locals never approach the place.”

He looked back to the bottom of the trail he had climbed. The forest below resembled the kind of jungles unique to the tropics.

Past the forest were a sandy beach and the dark ocean.

The giant mass of light on the ocean was Hong Kong Island and the smaller lights were the other islands.

“That must be Beaufort Island. The scent is stronger over there, so it may be what I’m looking for.”

His nose detected the scent of blood his familiar had found.

That same scent filled this place.

Just as Akira and Gunmal could see Lives, Kouga could see the scent of blood.

The scent before his eyes here was thick and high quality.

It floated around the area with the density of a light mist.

…Why can I smell so much blood? Did someone perform a Demon Summoning or something?

The scent of blood was strongest two or three steps ahead.

"?"

In the very center of the small peak, he saw traces of a large amount of blood.

The traces seemed to glow before Kouga's eyes.

"It's filled with the power of Yang. There's no mistaking it now."

This blood belonged to Huang Daquan, an Archs.

As he approached, the bloodstains became evident.

"But that Nein Engel committed suicide in his home, so why is his blood here? …Ah!"

He immediately found his answer.

He saw countless glowing words written there.

The words formed emblems.

Many different emblems made of Chinese characters were joined together into a circle on the volcanic rock ground.

It was six or seven meters across and no one but Kouga would have been able to see it.

"A Tune Emblem. And a huge one at that. …Is this one of the Death Technos lost during the Fifth Divine Punishment War?"

A Tune Emblem was like sheet music that encoded a Live's Word Color and Tempo in writing.

It was arranged in a circle, it was activated by striking a point in the center called the Baton, and it would Tune the surrounding space according to what was written in it.

"If it's Death Techno, the General would probably know what it does at first glance."

Kouga spotted the Baton in the center and noticed it had already been struck.

This emblem had already been activated.

He pulled a Discord Bomb from his pocket and looked at it. A close inspection of the pencil-sized bomb showed it had an emblem drawn on it too.

That small Discord Bomb would destroy the Lives within five meters when it detonated, but the Tune Emblem in front of him was many times larger.

"When you make it this big… Well, the effective Octave of a Tune Emblem is equal to ten thousand times four to the power of how many meters it is, right? This thing has a radius of about six meters, so…"

…Four to the sixth times ten thousand is an Octave of…40,960,000!?

That was a massive Octave.

Akira was the most powerful Tuner that Kouga knew and even she could only control an Octave of 1,280,000. Rin was called a genius for her 320,000 and a normal person did well to control 80,000.

What could be created or destroyed from controlling an Octave in the tens of millions?

Kouga wanted to call it insane, but he recalled a certain fact.

"There aren't others like this on Beaufort Island and Tsing Yi Island, are there?"

"Well done. The ADs Device has already reached the depths of the ley line."

"!"

Kouga turned toward the sudden voice just as his right arm vanished at the shoulder.

"What!?"

The attack had been too intense to feel any pain. Losing his arm threw off his balance and he fell to his knee. He held his right shoulder and found his hand was touching bone.

The ocean wind blew across the peak and onto his exposed bone. It felt hard, but even more…

…*It feels cold.*

As soon as he thought that, blood spewed from his shoulder. It was too much to contain with his left hand.

A normal person would have died of blood loss from it all, but Kouga's eyes remained strong as they faced forward through his sunglasses.

Two men stood before him.

One was a six-winged Seraph wearing a white combat coat. He held a Device-like sword, so he had likely been the one to sever Kouga's arm.

The other wore a black combat outfit over a Custom Body. A closer look showed his Custom Body swelling out tightly around the neck and shoulders.

…He had a lot of alterations done around the neck and back? Does that mean…?

Kouga had his thoughts cut off.

"Yes, only a winged-race would need to modify that area. That is what happens when you remove your wings."

"!?"

The Seraph had read his thoughts.

Before he could ask how, the Seraph smiled and spoke.

"It would be best not to think. I can read your Live quite easily."

That told him who this was, but if this Seraph could read his Live…

"Ha! So you know Akira. I see, so the Yard has already made it this far in pursuing Huang Daquan's death, have they?"

The Seraph read Kouga's thoughts again and stepped forward.

Kouga shuddered at his unhesitating movement.

He held his right shoulder, stood up, and backed away, but the Seraph only smiled.

"I can't have you viewing me on the same level as Akira. I am not a mere child playing around with Tuning Lives into small animals."

The Seraph stopped and lightly raised his Device toward the night sky.

"The moon is nice tonight," he whispered.

He gave a short and simple call to the surrounding Lives using an Over Up.

"Word Accel! Oh, you Lives of 160,000 Octaves."

The wind immediately produced a shape. It was a leopard colored the blue of the wind.

"That was fast!"

Normally, Tuning took some time.

To transform a Live, one had to learn the target object's Live, have the Live hear you, and fuse it with your own Message.

Kouga remembered it taking five or six seconds for Akira to create a dog or a cat.

But this Seraph had created a leopard in under a second.

…This isn't good.

Kouga let go of his shoulder and let it bleed as he dug through his pocket.

He pulled out his handgun: a Webley & Scott 6-round revolver.

While backing away, he pressed down the hammer.

He heard the metal locking into place.

At the same time, the leopard began to run. And it did so along the wind in midair.

Its roar sounded just like the roar of the wind.

He stopped and held up his Webley & Scott in one hand. He stiffened his entire body to brace against the recoil of the .45 caliber round.

He fired and the blast cut through the wind.

The recoil hit him hard. The blood must have loosened his grip because his arm flew upwards and the Webley & Scott slipped from his hand.

But the shot had been accurate.

The bullet flew straight and light wrapped around it in midair.

Just like the Discord Bomb, it had an emblem drawn on it.

The light trailed behind it like a comet and transformed into a spear.

This was a German anti-demon round.

"!"

The Seraph gave a gasp of surprise.

The leopard stopped, but it could not evade. The spear hit it right in the face.

The weapon stabbed in up to the base.

The leopard rolled along a nonexistent midair ground and roared.

However, that cry ended it.

The floating leopard quickly expanded and burst.

It made a "sh" sound as it did so.

Only the spear of light remained and it fell. When it reached the volcanic rock, it stabbed in with a white sound.

Kouga stared forward while shaking the fingers he had hurt when the gun had slipped from his grasp.

The Seraph still held his Device in the same place as before.

"I see. I suppose you *are* part of the Yard that protects Hong Kong. That was quite the strange bullet."

"But unlike the ones used by our forces, it had not been refined."

There was no inflection to the cyborg Galgallin's voice. He must have eliminated his emotions when altering his body.

Kouga sighed and realized the blood flowing from his shoulder was slowing, so he brought his hand back to it.

"What are Nein Engels doing here?"

"We detected someone investigating our ceremony, so we stopped by to…eliminate them."

"Your ceremony?"

That would be the Tune Emblem drawn on the ground here.

…That big an emblem is a ceremony?

He suddenly remembered something.

"The General mentioned rumors of an Earth Serpent out at sea."

"An Earth Serpent?" asked the Seraph.

Kouga frowned and the Seraph continued.

"People thought *that* was an Earth Serpent? A ceremony that small can only awaken an Earth Wyvern. …Then again, I am the only one that can create something even at that level."

The other Nein Engel tapped the Seraph on the shoulder.

He seemed to be saying not to say anything more.

"I know, Fei," answered the Seraph.

Kouga reacted to that name.

"Fei!? You mean Fei the Galgallin!?"

That was the man Rin was searching for.

The man referred to as Fei turned toward Kouga. His false eyes glowed red behind his mirrorshades. It was a cold, emotionless light.

Kouga instinctually put up his guard just as Fei charged in.

He was fast. He immediately covered the ten step distance.

Kouga immediately made a counterattack.

"Headbutt!"

He did exactly as his shout suggested.

…It hit!

With that realization, a great shock reached him.

His body was blown away and his bones cried out. Instead of simply breaking, they were smashed to pieces.

…!?

For just an instant, he saw Fei standing next to him despite having charged in straight ahead.

Only then did Kouga realize he had been kicked.

He saw the sky and the moon and stars filled that night sky.

The only thing he felt was his body falling. He fell from top to bottom and from back to stomach.

To his left was a rising cliff face, so he had apparently fallen from the cliff.

For a few seconds, he felt like he was floating, but he soon completed the nearly one hundred meter drop and his back slammed into the ground.

The ground below was the bare volcanic rock of the mountainside.

His body burst like a melon and his vision went dark.

Part 3

Even Hong Kong grew a little quieter by two in the morning.

Even with plenty of nocturnal Glossolalians, the majority of the population was still human.

But one place was reaching its peak business as the final challenge for the day.

The Bird Garden was a famous market west of Mong Kok Station.

The squawking of birds created a great din. Many birds, both large and small, were chirping and tweeting together.

The eaves of the shops on either side of the narrow road were close enough to bump into each other and bird cages were hanging from them all. The smell of birds, chirping, the scissoring and mechanical noises of bird cages being made, the smell of varnish, and the lights all mixed together into a vague heat.

The combined Live of the market was naturally a bright yellow.

The people walking down the road were nocturnal Glossolalians as well as Hong Kong residents and tourists who did not want to waste the night sleeping. A closer look revealed that there were children there as well as adults. Most of the children were locals who were used to being up at this time, so they showed no sign of weariness.

The entire market was filled with bright and lively Lives.

But there was a single gap in that Live performance.

In that one place, the Lives did not advertise their presence. The birds, people, and other things that entered that gap were all focused on the individual at the center.

It was a female Nein Engel with four wings.

It was Genius.

Everyone's eyes were focused on her wings.

They were wings that no one could ever create and no bird could ever gain.

They were wings that could only exist in one's imagination.

The birds and people were all focused on those wings.

But Genius did not mind. When the birds stopped chirping and looked up at her, she would look them in the eye and sometimes touch their cage or smile.

She was taking a walk through the city for the first time since leaving J-Gun.

"His younger brother is using the Urban Name of Gunmal, too?"

She smiled bitterly.

…J-Gun had me call him that when we first met.

The two of them had walked through this area back then.

Even while working at Archs RDC, she had almost never gone out into the city of Hong Kong. She would leave Hong Kong Cave using a dedicated transportation vehicle and she had been able to spend the night in her office.

Also, the idea that Nein Engels were hated by the people of Hong Kong was a fact, not a persecution complex.

That was evident even now.

There was a strange look in the eyes of the people she passed by. They saw her as something that should not be here.

She could sense it all the more when walking alone like this.

"How can Double Lee's sister manage to live here?"

Genius had never met Double Lee's younger sister who went by the Urban Name of Akira, but she had long heard the rumors.

She was a Seraph, but she had only two wings due to the deformities all too common in Nein Engels.

She was a tuner just like her brother.

Three years before, she had suddenly left Hong Kong Cave.

And Double Lee had not forgotten her.

"He must have a reason."

Genius touched a nearby cage. A white dove stared at her from inside the bamboo cage.

She stared back for a while, but finally removed her hand from the cage.

"Sorry," she said before resuming her walk.

That was when she heard a strange sound.

It was a loud and intense, but it was only a single sound.

It came from a shop that had a rest bench sticking out into the road.

"?"

The sound came again.

It was the chirping of birds, but it was too coordinated. It sounded like they were beginning to sing on some kind of signal. Someone could possibly teach a myna to do that, but this included the voices of much smaller birds.

Curious, Genius walked forward.

A man sat on a bench. He had his back to Genius, he was facing the birds and local children inside the shop, and he held a yueqin.

The birds and children inside the shop were all looking to the man and waiting for him to do something.

“Listen. Basically, the birds just have to make the sound you want. Akira taught you about Tuning, right? This is the same. You let the birds hear your Live.”

The man’s voice sounded a lot like J-Gun’s.

He played a note on the yueqin and the birds sang the same note.

“See? Neat, isn’t it?”

The children nodded and expressed their surprise or amazement.

“From what you said, Akira taught you like this, didn’t she?”

The children voiced their affirmation.

“Then continuing like that would probably be best. At the very least, you won’t become the boring kind of Busters or Tuners that your parents would think of. So when you get home and your mom gets after you, tell her you’re doing it because it’s fun. Ask her what’s wrong with that.”

He laughed and answered someone’s question.

“Me? I’m Akira’s… well, I’m kind of like her friend. We were doing stupid stuff together a bit ago.”

He handed the yueqin to a nearby child.

He seemed to have borrowed it.

When the children saw he had returned the yueqin, they grew excited.

The man rubbed one boy’s head and slowly stood.

Genius recognized the profile she saw.

It was J-Gun.

…You're kidding.

"That's… his brother?"

Before she could accept that fact, he turned his back and she had no way of checking on him any further.

He began to walk away with the children surrounding him.

Even though he was leaving, she took a step back.

…He mentioned Akira, didn't he? It can't be…

Or could it?

Without answering her own question, she bit her lip.

She turned her back on the man.

She ignored everything and hurried away.

She left that market as quickly as she could.

Part 4

There was no such thing as a peaceful night at Hong Kong Yard.

Even in the middle of the night, the headquarters had its lights on.

The white fluorescent light shined on a few night shift workers… and Rin.

She faced a desktop computer and wore the same clothes as when Akira and Gunmal had left.

She had been here dealing with this or that for over six hours.

"I finally got the search macro built… Now I just have to gather all the data."

She removed her hands from the keyboard and stretched lightly.

"You work hard," commented an elderly worker at a nearby seat, so she gave an arbitrary response and wiped away the tears in the corners of her eyes.

She finally looked to the window. It was growing brighter and a blanket with wings lay on the sofa below it.

That was Akira.

"I can't believe she can sleep face-down like that. …Of course, Kouga can only sleep inside a coffin."

She tilted her head.

"But when did she pair up with Gunmal like that?"

The two of them had patrolled the streets of Hong Kong ever since then.

Akira belonged to Cleared which more or less dealt with the citizen's troubles. They would get rid of poltergeists created by disturbed Lives or Tune destroyed houses to fix them.

"That's a lot like a mother's way of thinking."

…Well, I doubt it will end as pathetically as with me and Fei.

She then changed the look in her eyes and the direction of her gaze.

She looked to the monitor beyond her glasses. The cursor on the screen followed the movements of her eyes thanks to the sight device in the edge of her glasses.

The cursor moved along the displayed results of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange and searched for the company names that matched the conditions she gave.

"So Archs RDC really is going to break up at seven tonight. The stocks of the inheriting companies are rising, so the insider traders must already be at work."

She muttered her thanks for that as she closed the stock exchange page.

The screen now showed the system's OS.

She looked to the icon on the far left that led to the Yard's databank.

The cursor moved there and she clicked on the keyboard.

As soon as the databank server's screen opened, she began typing.

She displayed the business details of the companies from her previous search and saved them.

Overlapping windows of text appeared on the screen. More and more appeared at a pace of about one every three seconds.

"Hm, this is a lot."

She grabbed her coffee cup and took a sip. It was cold, but she did not care.

She could barely taste anything this late at night, so she only tasted the bitterness.

She thought about the flavor of the bitter coffee while connecting the computer to Hong Kong's network line.

It immediately asked whether she wished to use any assistance software.

"…"

She silently inserted the MD-ROM she had prepared.

The computer read in the communications assistance software approved by the Governor of Hong Kong.

Once the official title popped up, she forcibly ejected the MD-ROM.

She then pulled a different MD-ROM from her pocket and shoved it in.

"No matter how much the corporations go crying to the governor, they can't come up with a way of keeping me from doing this."

Without waiting a moment, the computer resumed reading the MD-ROM.

The title on the screen blacked out and the network map appeared instead.

The commands were displayed on the upper right, but the display was different from the legitimate program.

"These Japanese programs are frightening. This thing can even destroy pursuing programs. …ID spoofing, ID changes every hour, decoy creation, and the option to transfer into a decoy. And it's all automated from a single command."

She went through all of the commands and began working.

That was when the headquarters' door opened.

…?

She turned around when she heard all of the night shift personnel quickly stand and she found the General standing in the entrance.

"Ah."

Surprised, she stood too and saluted.

Before she could greet him, he gestured for them to sit. As they all did, he walked over to her.

He looked toward her and Akira who slept over by the window.

"Oh, what's this? A young girl like you shouldn't be workin' so late. It ain't good for you, Rin."

"This is my job."

"I see. …Are you usin' that machine to search for that cheeky Huang bastard? Oh, you've got a lot you're searchin' for there."

Rin looked to the text already displayed on the screen and nodded.

"I always have these in reserve for dummy searches. If they can tell what you're focusing on as soon as you get your footing, they put their guard up a lot quicker."

She brought her hands back to the keyboard.

"I'm going to input the search terms I need now."

She looked at the text lined up on the monitor.

The very top of the search list was the name Fei Garland.

That was a dummy search.

That name had yet to return any search results.

…I haven't found anything in five years now.

Just as she began to type, the General spoke up as if he had just remembered something.

"Oh, right. Hey, Rin. If you've got the time, could you search for 'Device' and 'J-Gun Maldrick' too?"

"Are you referring to Akira's case?" she asked with a bitter smile. "I'm doing those searches at the same time here. The two of them asked me personally, but…as they said, you shouldn't hope for much."

No matter how skilled a Buster swordsmith he had been, she could not imagine a personal workshop would have a connection to Archs RDC. Still, she could at least use it as a dummy search.

"What, are things not goin' well?"

"Why do you think I've been up all night? …And does this mean you're curious about Akira's case too?"

"Yeah, a little. I suppose."

After hearing his answer, she continued.

"General, you told me before that Akira's father was your subordinate, right?"

"…"

"And just between the two of us, her father died in the exact same way as Huang Daquan."

"Oh?"

"By any chance, do you secretly know everything going on behind the scenes in this case?"

"Why would I know that?"

She hesitated but answered.

"I feel a connection here. A human and a Nein Engel died in the exact same way and you have the exact same scar on your cheek as that human."

"A connection, huh?"

"You may not have noticed, but you're a bit of a mystery. What were you doing before the Fourth Divine Punishment War, why do you never call anyone over to your house, and does your wife actually exist?"

"I hear everyone's bettin' money on the truth of some of that."

Hearing that, Rin looked taken aback and quietly cleared her throat.

"I-I apologize. I got carried away just now. …I haven't gotten enough sleep."

She then looked to Akira's sleeping form and gave a deep sigh to shift her focus.

The General looked over, too.

"Is somethin' the matter with Akira?"

"Apparently she wasn't able to do anything when J-Gun died."

"Well, there's no helpin' that. Not even a Tuner can just walk up and Tune someone who's about to die."

"But she's kept her Device by her side ever since then. She used to keep it safely in her locker"

That had changed over the past few days.

"I think it's a good change. Recently, she's been teaching the local children about Tuning and she's changed in a number of other ways too."

"Sigh. I see you're really watchin' closely, Rin."

"That's just the kind of person I am."

Rin looked back to the monitor and gently licked her lipstick-covered lips.

"Now, I'm about to make my way into Archs RDC's databank. This is probably my last chance at this."

She then hit the enter key to set it all in motion.

It only took five seconds for something unexpected to happen.

Part 5

A loud warning sound came from Rin's computer and the General gave a shout.

"Danger!?"

The fifth window had been caught by a defense program.

Rin quietly frowned and had the fifth window displayed on top.

Her search program was on the run and the defense program was in pursuit.

"That's a special type. …Does it pursue a specific search term?"

The security check had reacted to the search term instead of her entry into the databank.

"This isn't good. I'll scatter dummies and jump to a decoy waiting outside. If I go through a slow local network, I can launch the destruction program while the data's being consumed there."

She gave a number of commands and started the process.

The commands ran in an instant.

"Meanwhile, I'll gather the data I can with the surviving programs. Once I have it, I'll escape."

The contents of the fifth window changed as per her instructions.

All the while, the other windows were rapidly completing their searches.

"What was that? This is some security company's databank, right?"

"Yes, the one in charge of Archs RDC's security. That company is why Archs RDC doesn't need the Yard's help."

"Kah. That cheeky bastard's cheeky company sure is cheeky."

"It goes back to that 'cheeky' company's rival breaking the law and angering them."

The eleven windows finished their searches and closed.

All of the necessary data had been extracted.

As for the fifth window…

"Did it escape?"

Rin immediately switched networks and jumped to Japan via satellite connection.

"I'll take it inside Zenon City – Tokyo's market and…"

She deleted the program there.

The display instantly blacked out, but the system OS screen soon returned.

She had fully escaped from the network.

She sighed, removed her glasses, and rubbed her eyes.

"That last one was definitely a surprise."

"I don't know anythin' about this stuff, so I couldn't follow any of it."

"I doubt you could."

She put her glasses back on and began operating the computer with only the keyboard.

She opened a programming editor and placed the data inside.

In less than a second, she eliminated the test from the dummy searches and began to read.

"…"

Her breath contained a hint of disappointment.

"None of it has anything to do with the case."

"Did you find any dirt on Huang?"

"If it was that easy to find, no one would do that kind of thing in the first place. …The information you want tends to be the hardest to find, General. Look."

She made a single search as a test.

Search : "J-Gun" : Run

The name was not found anywhere in the data.

"Hm. You're right."

"This is pretty common."

With that short answer, she went ahead and checked the other search term: Device.

Something suddenly popped up.

…?

She checked the screen and saw one of the corporations was a trader that dealt in decorations. Devices were sometimes used as gifts instead of for their power.

"Not quite. J-Gun would have made them on his own."

The Devices the corporation dealt in were all special orders from jewelers, shops for nobles, or sporting goods companies. The orders were mostly sent to factories, used units of dozens or gross, and had numbers like ten or twenty.

However, one odd number caught her eye.

"An order for five. …With four cleared for production? And a request for more?"

All the other deals involved more than a hundred Devices, but this one order was for a mere five.

"The order was placed by…Genius Elias?

She recognized the name.

It was the name J-Gun had called just before dying.

Rin stopped moving for a moment.

"…"

She suddenly gave a large nod, turned toward the General, and voiced her thoughts.

"I don't have any real proof, but there's a good possibility this Genius woman was the connection between Archs RDC and J-Gun."

The General tilted his head, so she pointed to the monitor.

"Look. This order was made about three months ago, but the number of Devices is just right for making in an individual's workshop. At the very least, it's different from the other wholesale deals made by the dozen or gross."

"Hm."

"And look at the phone number. The three leading digits don't exist in Hong Kong and the rest of the digits are too short. I bet if you add something…yes, like a '#' in front of those three leading digits, you would get an internal Archs RDC number. Also…"

"Also?"

"According to Gunmal, there's a good chance J-Gun hadn't returned home in the past three months."

At that point, the cellphone sitting on her desk began to ring.

"Hm?"

Akira showed signs of waking by the window, but Rin ignored it and answered the phone.

She recognized the voice she heard.

“Kouga? You’re late. What have you been doing?”

“Sigh. Rin, don’t get too mad at him,” said the General. “Men have a lot we’ve got to deal with.”

After listening to Kouga, she summed up the situation for the General.

“It seems he died a little.”

“Oh? But he got better?”

“Yes. He apparently turned to ash once. …What? You’re heading back there to retrieve your right arm? I wouldn’t. You might get killed again. Go drink some blood at the Human Meat Bar to recover. …Don’t worry. I’ll take it out of your welfare expenses.”

“Ahh, what do we do about his clothes? Last time he came back with bloody clothes, I gave him a hundred lashes.”

“Then he’ll need some new clothes. No, General, I’ll take them for him. …So how’d it go? I assume something happened since you were killed.”

Her expression changed as she asked that.

It stiffened and she slowly asked something else.

“A Tune Emblem…and a Nein Engel with a Device?”

“What about me?” sleepily asked Akira from behind.

Rin ignored her and gasped at what Kouga said next.

“Fei?”

She adjusted her grip on the phone.

"It was a Galgallin!? Yes, white hair and about as tall as you…. He'd Customized himself and…eh? He killed you? …Kouga! Don't be ridiculous!"

The call ended there.

She briefly heard a quiet electronic tone, so Kouga's phone had likely had its battery die.

She stared at the phone in her hand and sighed.

She realized the General and the other nearby personnel were looking at her.

"Ah."

"Sounds like this has gotten kinda tricky."

"Sorry. I shouldn't be dragging private issues into this."

"Really? But this Fei you've been searchin' for all this time was at that place Kouga went to. What was it? Where he found Huang's blood?"

"Please don't say that!"

Rin shouted and crossed her arms as if holding her body.

"Give me some time to think about what this means."

She closed her eyes and mouth.

Silence fell and a chilly atmosphere filled the area.

Before long, something broke that chilliness.

"Huh? What is it, Rin?"

She turned toward the voice and saw Akira standing there with a sleepy look in her eyes.

"Rin, your monitor."

She turned back around and saw the data on the corporation from the fifth window that had gone through the chase.

It had not managed to even start its search, so only the initial search term was displayed.

The defense program had been triggered by that term.

“Fei Garland? Isn’t that the guy you’re…?”

Akira fell silent when she saw Rin staring at the screen.

The woman remained silent without caring that her thoughts could be seen in her Live.

After a while, she forcefully stood from her chair and put on her coat.

“I’m going to meet up with Kouga.”

“Rin!?”

She did not answer Akira’s cry.

Her footsteps rang throughout the office, a stark contrast to her Live that was oddly still and filled with hesitation.

It was a painful Live to see or hear.

Interlude 2

Tedious and deep darkness slipped past several metal beams and fell down through a giant pit.

On its way down to the bottom of the hole, the darkness was blocked by some faint light.

There was a small light source on Hong Kong Cave’s 163rd floor down.

It came from Hong Kong Cave’s reserve lights.

A comparatively large number of Nein Engels lived in that area.

The edge of the hole was used as the main pathway and some could be seen walking here and there even though morning had yet to arrive.

Among them, a Nein Engel rested her elbows on the railing and stared at the metal beams far overhead.

It was Genius.

She had been born on this level and seemed to be known around here. A passing Nein Engel would occasionally greet her and she would wave back.

It was a common scene.

“Today is the day of the second repatriation ceremony,” she muttered while looking up at the dimly-lit heavens.

She held her left hand toward those heavens and she wore a plain ring on that hand.

“That city connects heaven and earth, hm?”

She clenched that hand into a fist.

At that very moment, a voice replied to her previous comment.

“But you do not have anyone to smile with. And neither do I.”

She turned around to find Double Lee.

He gave a self-deprecating smile and said more.

“But reviving the destroyed heaven is still necessary.”

Genius put her guard up, hid her left hand by crossing her arms, and gave a deep sigh.

She replied while making sure Double Lee could not read her mind.

“Heaven was destroyed and returned to nothing during World War Two, but you’re going to revive it by destroying Hong Kong. …Which

will take more lives? The past return to nothingness or the present destruction?"

"Instead of comparing the two, you must continue adding everything in the positive direction. That will lead you to the proper answer."

"Are you turning this into a holy war?"

Double Lee smiled bitterly at that.

"Can you call it a holy war before the battle even begins? The distinction between holy and evil is decided by the outcome."

"That may be true, but…"

"From here on, anyone but a Nein Engel will die if they are caught in the repatriation ceremony. The only ones who can withstand heaven's air are us and the souls of the dead. …That is why I did the most I could to help. I broke up Archs RDC and matched the timing with Hong Kong's return to China. Also…"

"Today's second repatriation ceremony will blow away nearly half of Hong Kong?"

He nodded at her question.

"On the night of Hong Kong's return in two weeks' time, the final repatriation ceremony will take place and the entirety of Hong Kong will be destroyed. …This second repatriation ceremony is merely the prelude, but it will be enough of a demonstration that only the truly foolish or indecisive will not leave."

"Are you sure?"

"?"

"I think the people who love this city will stay."

"What a sentimental idea." Double Lee seemed to cast aside the words. "Only the people with nowhere left to go will stay. Those people who

have resigned themselves to death will be caught in the ceremony, but that is a net gain for the world."

"Hong Kong's greatest Tuner certainly sees things differently."

"I simply know what is truly important."

He spoke with a powerful tone and looked up into the sky.

"Once the four Earth Wyverns and the Earth Serpent guided by them reach heaven, that destroyed place will regain its land. The surface will simply lose one small city, but in exchange, the many angels, Nein Engels, and wandering souls will gain a home."

Could he see the door to heaven in Hong Kong's sky?

That door would vanish once England returned Hong Kong to China.

"We have no time. This will likely be called the Sixth Divine Punishment War, but it must be done. If J-Gun is resurrected today and he creates the Device in the next two weeks, we can hold the final repatriation ceremony on the night of Hong Kong's return."

He took a breath.

"We will only just barely make the time limit."

"You're right," said Genius. "Double Lee, you're resurrecting J-Gun with necromancy, aren't you? Fei just left again."

"Do you resent me?"

"Of course not. …Have you seen his past? A murderer's soul could certainly never go to heaven. And…"

"And?"

"I was walking through Hong Kong for the first time in a while and I saw J-Gun's brother."

"Really?"

Double Lee gave an exaggerated look of surprise and she continued.

"He seems to know your sister."

"!?"

"J-Gun's younger brother and your younger sister. …Do you think we'll end up fighting them?"

He pulled a report from his pocket and glanced at it.

"Yes, just as it says here, Master Huang said someone would oppose me if I tried to connect this city to heaven with Tuning."

"I heard him say that, too. Whenever he said it, he would give this satisfied smile like he knew everything that was going to happen. …But was he referring to your sister?"

He did not answer her, but he did say something else.

"It seems we really do need the help of Hong Kong's #1 Buster."

His expression was as calm as ever and he gently tapped the bottom of his coat so she would see.

It produced a quiet metallic sound.

The ADs Device that J-Gun had created was there.

"He was immensely skilled, just like me."

Genius had a feeling he was avoiding the previous subject, but she did not pursue it any further.

Meanwhile, he continued.

"Busting is the destruction of your opponent's Live, but that requires more than simply slamming your own Live against them. To effectively strike their Live, you must have a thorough knowledge of it."

"J-Gun could do that."

Double Lee nodded.

"But he was not talented."

"…? Then what about you, Double Lee? Do you claim to have inborn talent?"

He did not immediately answer.

He frowned and seemed to choose his words carefully for once.

"Do you know the difference between normal people and those known as talented or prodigies? Do you know why he left the formal Maldrick family and moved to this mixture of a city?"

"Well…"

"It is not a happy thing. …And I more or less understand it."

He once again looked into the narrow sky.

"It is all known by the Flight Song, that single beautiful song passed down from the founding of Hong Kong Cave."

"The Flight Song?"

"It is a wonderful song. …A wonderful song that's meaning contains a great contradiction that only I know at present."

His words were directed at someone other than Genius, but only he knew who that person was.

Act 6: Chase the Rhythm (9:56)

Part 1

It was 9:30 AM, a subtle time in which the air transitioned between morning and midday.

People were beginning to work at that time, but the restaurant inside the Yard was still packed full.

It had the dangerous-sounding name of the Human Meat Bar.

The entire place was painted red and it was too small for more than around a dozen people to fit.

However, it was not just the small size that made it feel busy.

The Human Meat Bar's main selling point was its exclusive focus on Glossolalian clientele.

The individuals in blue uniforms causing all the lively noise at the counter and tables were Hard Wolves, Half Fish, and the like.

They came here to mark the start of the day.

The steam rising from the bowls and pots surrounded the blue of their uniforms and the red of the walls.

Mixed in with it all was a pure white that almost looked gold.

The color took the form of two wings which stood up within the steam.

They were Akira's wings.

She sat across from Gunmal at a small table in the back of the small restaurant.

She had a bowl of fish porridge, but…

"Gunmal, how can you eat that ramen? It's meant for *Lin Xiao Ren*. You know, those forest dwarfs?"

"Hm? Not to worry, not to worry. I trained my stomach to handle just about anything when I was in Japan."

"Japan? You went there?"

"You know Osaka, right? That city where the kids fight by singing and dancing? One of my brother's Devices ended up there."

Her eyebrows lowered at his use of the word "brother".

She sighed as she spoke.

"I'm not sure what to do about this morning's meeting. It was so sudden after Rin brought Kouga back."

He paused before replying.

"It had to have been a surprise. …Do you feel like quitting the Yard?"

…It's hardly new to get complaints as a Nein Engel.

"…is what I'd like to say."

"But you aren't."

He smiled bitterly, so he had to have read her Live.

Realizing that, she looked up.

She started to say something to him, but said something else instead.

"Both of our brothers are causing us trouble, aren't they?"

"The trouble with mine is over. Yours sounds like it could last a while longer, though."

…You make it sound like it isn't your problem.

She intentionally let him read her Live.

Just as he tilted his head at her sharp words, she swung around her ceramic spoon.

"Honestly, what was all that? A Tune Emblem drawn with Huang Daquan's blood? And it was probably done by him. That makes him a suspect for murder and desecration of a corpse… That's two crimes!"

"Yeah, I remember that from the meeting. They don't know what it was for, but the giant Tune Emblem could control an Octave of 40,960,000. …Did that delinquent guy investigate the site further after resurrecting?"

"I don't know, but I think the information on the Death Techno Tune Emblem is from what he saw before being killed."

"I see." Gunmal nodded. "Come to think of it, what is this Death Techno they mentioned in the meeting?"

"When Hong Kong was burned in the Fifth Divine Punishment War, the imperial documents on Tuning and Busting were burned too. Those had instructions on secret techniques beyond normal Tuning and Busting."

"Secret techniques? You mean like controlling the Lives of Yin and Yang instead of the standard elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water? Or controlling the Space-Time Lives or the Three Laws for summoning dragons?"

Akira was stared blankly as he rattled it off like it was nothing.

"Wow. How do you know all that?"

"I'm from Europe's head Buster family."

"Hmm. I only have the General and Rin to hear about this stuff from. But I have heard of the Three Laws."

"They're called 'secret techniques', but they're really just two types of Lives and some dragons. …So they call that Death Techno here?"

"What do they call it in Europe?"

"Legends. My family is all about Busting, but no one thinks about secret techniques. They're too busy fighting wars."

"I see…"

Gunmal tilted his head.

"If that Tune Emblem was made with Huang What's-His-Name's blood, were they trying to draw out the Death Techno power of Yang? …I see. Having a skilled brother sure isn't easy. For either of us."

"You know…"

Akira frowned, but he stopped her with a hand.

"He has my brother's Device, which makes this part of my job. …Did you say his Urban Name was Double Lee?"

"His Wild Name is Lee Leed. Hence, Double Lee."

…Just to be clear, I'm not telling you my Wild Name.

He blatantly grimaced at her thought and sighed.

"I'm not going to search your Live for your Wild Name or anything."

"Shut up. That's just standard etiquette for anyone involved in Tuning or Busting."

"You're not very friendly. …Not that I'm much different."

"Honestly, you sure are carefree. How did your second questioning go?"

"I had to use my brain way too much for so early in the morning."

"I do get the feeling you don't like using your brain. …And don't change the subject."

"You want to know about my brother's relationship?"

…You mean the woman named Genius?

He silently nodded and skillfully used his chopsticks to grab a piece of chicken from his ramen.

“Want some?”

“Can you not see my wings?”

“Is that how that works?”

“Of course.”

“So I was right. You *do* primarily eat caterpillar- ow! Don’t throw your spoon!”

She ignored his protest, lowered her eyes, and thought.

…All of this is centered on Nein Engels. This isn’t good.

“What’s wrong with that? Your brother’s your brother, right?”

“You can only say that because you don’t know how Nein Engels are treated in Hong Kong.”

“Really? I doubt my brother and the girl in that picture yesterday were giving much thought to persecution. At least not between the two of them.”

“How can you say that? You’re being irresponsible.”

“I can tell.”

He sounded strangely decisive for once.

Akira, on the other hand, grew briefly determined.

“But…”

However, she trailed off and never finished.

Her eyebrows meekly lowered and she remained quiet to hide something.

A short silence fell.

Once the silence grew awkward, Gunmal swallowed it up along with his ramen soup.

“According to Rin, she contacted my brother to have him make some Devices, but I personally think the situation changed some after that.”

…*Changed? You mean…*

“Does that kind of thing interest you?”

“Don’t even think about asking if I want to experience it for myself.”

“Tch.”

Gunmal clicked his tongue, but she still could not see his Live.

…*But I’m starting to get the hang of his pattern.*

She looked to him and suddenly thought of J-Gun and Genius.

A human and a Nein Engel.

Her parents and Rin and Fei had made the same combination.

…*Can it just not work?*

As that question filled her heart, he clenched his fist.

“Okay, I get it now. You’re worried about the issue of a human and Nein Engel couple.”

Before she could complain that he had read her Live, he leaned forward.

She tried to resist, but he placed his hands on hers and skillfully held them.

Instead of an attack, she only let out a protest.

“Wait, wait, wait! Who ever said anything about you and me!?”

"Don't worry. I'm perfectly fine with equalizing our Lives in a Live exchange session."

"You need to stop doing things so suddenly! And let go of my hands!"

"No thanks. If I let go, you'd definitely hit me."

He used a jocular tone and leaned further forward, so she counterattacked with a headbutt.

"Gwoh!"

"Go die!"

He leaned back and cried out in pain while she shouted at him, but then she looked around.

"…"

She had thought the surrounding Lives were awfully quiet and that turned out to be accurate.

The customers at the tables and counters and even the cook in the kitchen were looking at her and Gunmal. And they all seemed dumbfounded.

"You got a problem with us?" she asked.

They all quickly turned around, exaggeratedly cleared their throats, and resumed speaking or eating.

"They sure have a lot of free time," she muttered.

When she faced forward, she saw Gunmal with blood staining his face below the nose. She watched him press a handkerchief against his upper lip.

…Did I overdo that a little?

For once, she actually felt bad for what she had done.

"Should I Tune that for you, Gunmal?"

"No, you don't have to. It's not a problem."

"How can you say that when you're covered in blood?"

"It's fine, it's fine. It'll stop before long. …And didn't I say I don't want anyone to see my Live?"

She tilted her head at that.

…*Not even me?*

"Do you want to see it that badly?"

There was a bitter smile in his voice and she realized what her thought had meant.

She chose to give an exaggerated shrug.

"Of course not," she answered.

After that, both of them went quiet.

They could only hear the surrounding noise.

"…"

They matched the surrounding Lives by getting back to their food.

After finishing her meal, Akira got some dessert from the counter.

"Here, this will give you some energy for the morning. This is made for a *Mei Yuan*, so it should taste a lot like human food."

"Soup and…what are these?"

"Annin tofu and black sesame red bean soup."

"What was that second one?"

"You can just call it black-red soup. It's really dark, but it's surprisingly sweet and good for your hair."

"I see. So you *are* a girl."

"Why do you sound like you just discovered that?"

"Oh, I already knew that. I saw you naked earlier and you had everything necessary to be a gir-…"

"Don't say that out loud!"

Her shout gathered the other people's attention once more.

…Ugh.

She looked around, unsure what to do, and they all resumed eating again.

Their Lives all had a somehow bright Word Color.

It was not a bad color.

"Just calm down and get back to your seat."

She did as Gunmal suggested.

She dropped her hips down in to the chair and he spoke.

"To get back to our discussion, I know very well that you're a girl."

"Liar," she immediately replied. "You don't have to humor me. …I'm unsociable, I'm overly proud of my talent at Tuning, and my confidence is more masculine than feminine."

"…"

"I'm a Nein Engel, I'm selfish, I have thick eyebrows, I like staying up late, and I like sweets."

"You're getting a little off topic there."

"Oh, you're right."

She cleared her throat and thought.

…Gunmal, how can you say things like that?

"Like what?"

…Like when you compliment me.

He smiled bitterly.

"It's really not fair to ask me through your Live."

"That's because I don't know if I can say it out loud. …Will you answer me?"

"These things are best left unsaid."

"But…"

She trailed off and let him alone read her thoughts.

He simply nodded and smiled.

She did not look him back in the eye and drank the black-red soup in front of her.

It was only a little hot, so it must have cooled some.

Gunmal followed her lead and tilted his own bowl.

"I see… It's a bit strong, but I can drink this just fine."

"It was originally a Chinese medicine. Hong Kong's desserts tend to be either crushed or hardened."

"You know a lot about this."

“I’ve learned a lot since I came here. We didn’t have any of this in Hong Kong Cave. Everyone there does things the British way, so there were a lot of heavy sweets.”

“Is that so?”

He nodded just as someone entered the restaurant.

It was Kouga and the General.

When they spotted Akira and Gunmal, they rushed over through the small room.

Akira looked up when she noticed.

“What is it?”

The two had already reached the side of the table by then.

Kouga was the first to speak.

“I know you’re eating, but do you have a moment? Both of you.”

He brushed a hand through his blond pompadour.

“Um, Akira? Rin wants you in the headquarters at 10:30.”

“Eh? I thought I had patrol duty today.”

“That’s right. She’s supposed to show me around the city tod- ow!”

“Oh, sorry. A punch slipped out. And there? That had to have hurt. …So, Kouga, what’s going on?”

“Well… Is that guy all right?” asked the General.

“He’s fine, he’s fine.”

Akira answered in Gunmal’s stead.

Kouga glanced over at Gunmal as he groaned in pain, but he quickly answered Akira.

“I was originally supposed to go, but Rin stopped me.”

“Yeah, you did just grow in your right arm. So that’s what this is. …Well, don’t push yourself. You’ve been working all day, haven’t you? You should get some rest.”

“Sorry about this. Can you ask Rin about the job directly?”

Kouga looked over at Gunmal.

“It’s not something I want to say here.”

“Something you don’t want to say in front of me? Is it something indecent?”

The General smiled bitterly at Gunmal’s comment.

“Don’t be silly. You’re comin’ with me.”

“Geh. I’m stuck doing the indecent things with an old man?”

“Not that. You can visit J-Gun’s workshop now. I’ll show you the way.”

Gunmal and Akira exchanged a glance at that.

They gave each other a look that sarcastically said “have fun”.

Part 2

It was a clear day, so the midday sun looked white as it shined straight down from the heavens.

On this day, areas normally filled in shadow received direct sunlight.

This was true even in Hong Kong Cave.

On the sixth floor down, the sun lit up an old residential area with a good view of the blue sky.

No Nein Engels lived on this floor.

The floors near the surface were abandoned ruins.

Nevertheless, a Nein Engel with six wings stood in front of one house on the edge of the hole.

It was Double Lee.

"…"

Without speaking a word, he viewed the plain embedded house and sighed.

He then slowly pulled a Device from his coat.

It was the Device called ADs that J-Gun had made.

He placed it against the rusted metal door.

"Word Accel. Oh, you Live of 8,000 Octaves."

He emitted a small Live.

"Ha."

He produced a low but definite voice.

The Live responded with a slight metallic sound.

The door opened.

He put ADs away and impatiently pulled the door the rest of the way open.

He took a step inside.

There, he saw a small entranceway and a small kitchen.

Dust was piled up on the sunlit floor. The thickness of the dust showed years had passed.

Double Lee remained silent.

He entered without removing his shoes and left footprints in the dust.

He looked down and saw no tracks other than his own.

As soon as he noticed that, his expression distorted a bit.

This distortion was different from anger or a smile.

"…"

He looked back up and to the kitchen sink.

There was a discoloration in the dust where water had dripped from the faucet.

Other than that, the dust was entirely undisturbed.

Sun shining on a sink covered in a thick layer of dust was the perfect imagery to make the place feel truly abandoned.

He looked away from the sink and faced forward.

He walked and his footsteps sounded a bit muffled due to the dust.

He opened the door in the back of the kitchen to reach a fairly large living room.

It had a proper sofa and table. If it was cleaned, it could be used to entertain guests almost immediately.

If not for the dust, the room would have looked like someone had lived there quite recently.

The bright light from the window washed over him as he looked around the entire room.

His gaze suddenly stopped at a certain spot.

"…"

An upright piano was placed in one corner of the room.

It was covered in white dust and a picture frame sat on top of it.

He picked up that small wooden frame and he spoke.

“I’m home, I suppose.”

There was too much dust to see it properly, but the frame contained a photograph of four people.

The two standing on either side were likely the parents.

The quiet-looking mother was smiling and had a few wings, but there was not a wing to be seen on the father whose fearless smile twisted the scar on his cheek.

They were an unbalanced pair.

So were the two children standing between the parents.

One had several white wings that looked too large for him, but the other only had two small wings.

The child with two wings was clinging to her mother. If her expression had been visible, it would likely have shown her fear of the camera.

The rest of the family was probably smiling at that.

But in the present, Double Lee did not smile as he looked at it.

“You were so attached to mother, so why did you flee to the surface?” he asked the photograph. “Even if father’s death was near, you still could have saved mother. With Tuning…or with the secret meaning of the Flight Song.”

He sighed.

“It could have been you instead of me.”

He hung his head and looked at the floor in silence.

That silence was broken by a voice from outside.

“Double Lee! Are you in there!?”

It was Genius’s voice and she sounded somewhat uneasy.

“Double Lee! Fei is calling for you!” He ignored her second call as well.

He gently set down the picture frame and wiped the dust off with his fingers.

With the dust gone, the Nein Engel girl came into view.

His gaze met the frightened gaze of that girl from the past.

He gave a bitter smile that did not reach his eyes.

That must have been enough because he gave a large nod and called outside.

“Genius! What is it?”

In the time it took him to take a breath, his expression reverted to his normal, composed one.

“Double Lee!? Are you there?”

“Yes, I am. You say Fei is calling for me? I’ll be right there.”

He immediately began to walk.

His pace was calm and he quickly walked through the kitchen and out the front entrance.

“Oh.”

As soon as he left the dim room, the bright sunlight reached him. He felt the heat in his wings more than his skin.

It took several seconds for his eyes to adjust.

Once they did, he saw Genius standing in front of him.

She looked relieved to see him and she sighed.

“I’ve been visiting all sorts or ruins these past few days.”

“These are not ruins,” he corrected. “You say Fei is calling for me?”

“Yes, he wants to know the details for the Necromancy. …And he seems to want to put together a plan to bring everyone out of here before the second repatriation ceremony today.”

“I see.”

“We’re counting on you. You’re the only one Master Huang told everything to.”

“Only me, hm? Master Huang seemed very attached to my parents.”

“Your parents? Not to you?” asked Genius.

“I was only talking to myself,” he assured her with a bitter smile.

She frowned and he showed her his usual expression.

“We have to help Fei prepare, don’t we? We should hurry. It seems someone is looking for him.”

“Eh?”

“I would guess it’s only someone from the Yard with odd tastes, so we can probably ignore it.”

“But… How are they searching for him? He’s never revealed his name in his work and he lost his memories in the Customization process, right?”

Double Lee smiled bitterly before answering.

“It may be a connection from before he lost those memories.”

He took a breath.

"Genius, have you ever hated someone? Have you ever used that as your own driving force?"

"Eh?"

"I think that is why Fei altered himself like that and why you are going along with everything without trying to protect J-Gun."

"…"

She fell silent with a heavy and stiff look on her face.

Double Lee laughed and started walking.

"No need to give me that frightening look. …I think everyone has something like that. I do, you do, Fei does, and even Master Huang did."

And…

"There is nothing wrong with it."

He did not hesitate to jump into the giant pit of Hong Kong Cave.

He spread his six wings.

The white wings briefly let the sunlight wash over them, but they soon sank deep into the shadows of Hong Kong Cave.

Almost like a flower sinking into some watery depths.

Part 3

As the sun rose to the top of the heavens on the surface, Akira and Rin were underground.

This was not Hong Kong Cave. Just as that great pit had been created in Hong Kong Island, a layered sealed space existed below the Kowloon Peninsula.

However, no one lived there anymore.

Instead, the Yard used it as a morgue and catacombs for murder victims.

The concrete corridor was fairly wide and about four people could walk abreast. The side walls had doors embedded in them like on a ship.

“No one’s really maintaining the place, but it still doesn’t fall apart.”

“That’s because it was originally made for people to live in, just like Hong Kong Cave. They drilled through the volcanic rock and everything. …Oh, get a light ready. We’re heading down to the second level.”

“Sure, sure. We’re there already? We’ve walked a good ways from the entrance in the Kowloon Walled City.”

As she spoke, Akira attached a charm to the blade of her Device spear. It had a Tune Emblem written on it.

“Oh, you Lives concealing an Octave of 40,000. Oh, you mutterings of the light. Can you hear my Live?”

Then she let out a distinctive voice.

“La.”

As soon as her short and high-pitched Live rang through the air, the charm on the blade vanished.

Instead, light filled the blade. The light’s Live was white and with a quick Tempo.

It looks a lot like fluorescent light, thought Akira.

“The problem is you can’t get rid of the charm’s light if you want to.”

“I need you to light everything up, so forgive me.”

“I don’t really mind. It’s a nice change of pace from the usual investigations. Let’s go.”

A staircase landing was located on one side of the corridor. The stairs heading up were sealed off with a shutter, but the ones heading down led into the darkness.

That was the darkness that continued deeper underground and Akira began to take a step in that direction.

…?

But she stopped.

She focused on her ears and looked around.

"What is it, Akira?"

"You didn't hear that, Rin?"

"What…kind of Live was it?'

"I think it was Tuning. I heard a Tempo much like a human pulse."

"They're probably doing something up above. There's a university on the surface around here." A bitter smile entered Rin's voice. "Or are you afraid of the dark?"

"Of course not," replied Akira with a shrug.

She tilted her head and focused her ears again, but the Tempo was gone.

…I could have sworn it was coming from below.

But she had no proof, so she quickly caught up with Rin.

Her Device swept away the darkness and revealed the stairs and the second level's landing below.

She briefly hesitated but started down ahead of Rin. She also glanced down at her wristwatch.

"It's been that long? We've been down here for almost half an hour."

"We had to pass through several Emblem Seals on the way here, remember? If the corpses transform, we can't have them getting out to the surface like with the Second Divine Punishment War's…"

Rin trailed off and hung her head.

"Sorry."

"Eh?"

Rin's Live was emitting an indigo light.

Akira smiled a bit, stepped down onto the second level's landing, and spoke to Rin.

"Don't worry about it. That happened over a hundred years ago, so it has nothing to do with me."

"Well, there is that. But there's also our meeting this morning."

"You mean my brother? I don't really mind. He was a weird brother," she commented. "He's always been weird. You know the Flight Song? It's written on a monument at the very bottom of Hong Kong Cave and he would check on it every single day."

"The Flight Song? Why?"

"He said it contained a contradiction. …Hm, how should I put it?" She thought for a moment. "When you sing the Flight Song, it's a pretty cheerful song, right? But he said it didn't match the state of Hong Kong Cave."

"That's for sure. I've heard that historians claim it's so bright and hopeful specifically because it was created in the darkness."

"My brother's a pessimist, so he said he couldn't believe that. And…just between you and me, I kind of feel the same way when I'm underground like this."

Akira did not turn to look at Rin. She kept her eyes on the stairs leading down to the third level.

Those stairs were also sealed with a shutter, but the shutter was shaped differently from the one on the first level.

The steel shutter had been transformed.

It had swelled out and bent like a giant had punched at it from within.

“Don’t look at it. It’ll only make this harder.”

“The sixth level is supposed to connect to Hong Kong Cave, isn’t it?”

“These are only ruins. Keep that in mind.” Rin worked to keep all emotion out of her voice. “This is an afterimage of Hong Kong’s terror. When Hong Kong became British territory, the people fled underground in fear of the Glossolalians, but they sealed off the underground once they heard bacteria were spreading through it. These are the scars of the city’s foolish history.”

Akira hung her head, kept her eyes on the illuminated wall, and followed the markings forward.

“His name’s J-Gun, so is he in Block J?”

“No, it’s determined by species and then by surname, so Area 1 Block M.”

The two of them walked side by side.

“I’ve always wondered. Isn’t it a lot of work to carry the bodies down here?”

“This is the most practical option. If I have to choose between exhaustion and danger, I’ll go with exhaustion every time.”

“What if the choices are fame and fortune?”

“I’ll take them both and then take a break.”

"That's about what I expected from you, Rin. Are you really going to do this with J-Gun's corpse?"

"I got the medicine from Kouga's house, so there's nothing to worry about."

Rin pulled a small bottle from her pocket for Akira to see.

"Who would have thought we'd be communicating with the dead in this day and age."

"It just uses Tuning, right? All you do is try to replay as much of a vanished Live as possible."

"It must be nice being able to accept everything so quickly."

"But doing this counts as procuring evidence. England's Royal Law is really convenient."

Directly speaking with the victim was a necessary part of a criminal investigation.

That was usually not too difficult when they were still alive, but forcibly questioning a spirit of the dead was considered inappropriate.

British Territory was connected to heaven, so the dead had their own civil liberties.

They were only able to summon J-Gun's soul because of everything that had happened between Rin, Kouga, Akira, and Gunmal and because J-Gun was confirmed to be the victim of a crime.

"At the very least, we can summon Genius Elias, Lee Leed, and Fei Garland as persons of interest. …We don't have much time."

"Why not?"

"Hong Kong Cave is not a part of Hong Kong, so no data on them officially exists. The only direct connection between those three and us is Archs RDC."

"Oh, right. And Archs RDC was broken up yesterday."

"That's right. In another three days, all of the remaining data will be swallowed up by the firms that take over. Then it will all be erased from every last corner of the internet."

"Wow, Rin. You really know your stuff."

"I have to as a Searcher. …Oh, not that way. Area 1 is this way."

They took the corridor left and reached an open area.

The cramped shadows of the corridor suddenly grew into a vast darkness.

The two of them used the spear's light to walk through it.

After one, two, and then three steps, they stopped.

"…?"

On the large room's side wall, they saw a stairway landing much like the one they had used previously.

All of the stairways down had supposedly been sealed off and the Yard only used the second level for their catacombs.

But this one was open.

No, "open" was not quite the right word.

The shutter had been blown away down to the very bottom.

The steel panel lay in the middle of the room and it contained a deep depression in the very center.

"Was it destroyed by a fist?"

"Of course not. Not even a Hard Wolf or a Bigfoot could destroy that door. You saw that other one, right?"

“Unfortunately, the truth is right in front of us.”

“Rin, are you the type to meticulously keep track of your finances?”

“Of course.”

Rin stuck both her hands in her pockets and pulled something out.

She held a handgun in her right hand and a bundle of Tune Emblem charms in her left.

Both weapons gave off powerful Lives of destruction.

Rin began to resonate with them and identical Lives appeared and disappeared across her suit.

“Why do you have all that? Were you planning to start working as a Hound?”

“A true woman uses her entire body as a weapon.”

Her tone made it clear she was not at all joking as she faced forward.

The charms were held together by a metal ring like flashcards and she attached the ring to her watchband.

And with a hand on the charms, she was ready for a quick-draw.

Akira held her glowing Device in both hands and glanced over at Rin’s handgun.

“You’re using a different one again, aren’t you?”

“It’s a Henry Ball 90 my grandfather won in a duel.”

“Last time it was your father. Why do you feel the need to use your entire collection like this?”

“My collector of a grandfather was Chinese, you see.” She chose her words carefully. “And he was a totalitarian.”

“That’s not funny.”

As soon as Akira said that, something moved ahead of them.

“!”

Before she saw it, she heard the offensive Live.

Something flew out of the darkness in front of her.

The Word Color was red, the Tempo was cold, and the Message was as sharp as a scythe.

It was the Live of…

“A shockwave!”

Rin reacted to Akira’s shout by activating her charms.

With a single snap of the wrist, she threw three of them at once.

They flew straight forward and transformed into explosions of light.

They collided with the shockwave approaching through the large room.

With a great impact, the charms’ explosions negated the shockwave.

A heavy wind and a deep noise shook the room.

Akira squinted at the wind and placed her Live in her Device.

“…!”

Before the wind could die down, she amplified the Device’s light to help it grow.

The extended range of the light revealed the entire concrete room that measured fifteen meters on each side.

It was a little cramped to move around it.

…Where's the enemy?

Akira's thought was cut off by a gunshot near her ear.

Rin had fired her Henry Ball.

The stench of gunpowder contained a hint of calcium, meaning she had fired an anti-demon round.

Instead of aiming in the direction the shockwave had come from, she fired into the wall by the opposite corridor entrance.

The anti-demon round grew into spear of light in midair and stabbed halfway into the concrete wall.

"This is Hong Kong Yard! Your ridiculous defenses are meaningless! Come out with your hands up!"

Akira glanced over at Rin.

"You're so cool, Rin."

"Shut up. …I won't tell you again! You have ten seconds!"

No one answered, but they did hear something.

"Footsteps," said Akira. "Two sets."

Rin nodded, so she too must have heard with her ability as a Tuner.

However, she did not seem to understand what Akira said next.

"They both have hard Lives. They might not be human!"

"What?"

Akira was unable to answer.

Just as she had said, the Lives she heard in the darkness down that corridor were hard.

They were as harsh, flat, and unwavering as steel.

…Sein Fraus? No, then I would see mechanical Lives.

Which meant…

"Who are you?"

The answer came almost immediately.

Two men stepped out of the corridor and into the lit room and both women cried out when they saw them.

"J-Gun Maldrick!?" "Fei!?"

The Buster and Galgallin faced them and said nothing.

Fei's prosthetic eyes glowed red beyond his mirrorshades and J-Gun's eyes were lifeless, but both men stared intently at the women.

The chilly Lives of their gazes caused Akira to shrink back.

When she saw Rin take a mindless step forward as if being lured in, Akira panicked.

"Rin!?"

Rin did not respond.

"What is this? Why is Fei here and why is J-Gun alive?"

"Rin! Don't lower your gun!"

Akira's warning did not reach Rin.

…Not good.

Akira saw the Lives drifting through the room.

Normally, those hard Lives may have been called tension.

The Lives making up that space were waiting to see just what kind of Live would be played her and by whom.

And whatever it was, it was not going to be peaceful.

The Device in J-Gun's hand was visibly vibrating ever so slightly, so it had to have been what fired the previous shockwave.

…They're our enemies.

With those silent words, Akira nodded.

However, Rin had yet to come to her senses.

"Rin!"

Akira included her Live in her shout this time and Rin finally gasped. But instead of feeling relieved, Akira said more.

"Look carefully! Those two are-…"

Before she could say "enemies", the men made their move.

J-Gun raised his Device high while Fei raised his right arm to shoulder height.

The latter's forearm opened and a mortar protruded from the wrist.

"!"

The men attacked in unison.

The Live of destruction blew through the room and it all collapsed in an instant.

Part 4

With some guidance from the General who knew the area well, Gunmal found J-Gun's workshop right away.

It was located in the center of Yau Ma Tei, the business district for Hong Kong citizens. The simple one-story workshop was located among the barracks and cement houses.

A Wild Emblem depicting two intertwined dragons was engraved above the door.

“This the Maldrick family’s Wild Emblem, Gunmal?”

“You mean the Uroboros Rondo? Supposedly, my grandfather and the Wolf Worg – that’s the werewolf king – defeated two dragons. That’s how we became the head Buster family,” explained Gunmal while peering into the workshop. “The interior’s the same as the workshop back home. It’s all about function and looks like something out of the middle ages.”

“You mean it’s hopelessly outdated?”

The stone and cement workshop was filled with a strange scent.

It was a mixture of various metals: brass, copper, steel, lead, etc.

It was a cold scent that seemed to seep into one’s body.

But the odor of rust that joined it was due to the owner’s long absence.

If it was left alone much longer, the machinery would rust too and the entire workshop would be unusable.

But the bigger problem was a common point between the workshop and the adjoining home.

“What kinda idiot trashed the place?” muttered the General as he sat in one of the workshop’s chairs.

Gunmal looked around before nodding.

The workshop equipment was still in place, but the half-completed Devices and materials were scattered everywhere. Even the floorboards had been overturned, so whoever it was had to have been frantic.

"This must be why the Yard's investigation took so long. Everywhere they wanted to check had already been messed with."

"The things that Buster… The things J-Gun made were just that good.

Hearing that, Gunmal suddenly crouched down.

"…? What is it, kid?"

"Hm? When did the investigation end yesterday?"

"Last night. I think about the time you were out havin' some fun with Akira."

"Then someone with feathers like this was here since then. Look. And this, too."

Gunmal showed the old man a long feather and a ring.

Based on the length of the feather, it undoubtedly belonged to a Nein Engel.

"A brown feather and a ring? That mean what I think it means? J-Gun's de facto wife?"

"Probably. She must have stopped by to check on the place one last time. Or maybe because she's relying on her memories."

"If it's the latter, she must be a good girl what with the ring and all."

"Someone like that was wasted on my brother," muttered Gunmal with a smile.

He put the ring on his left pinky as if testing it out.

"If he was still alive, I probably could've gotten him to make a Device for Akira."

"No, one of J-Gun's Devices would've been wasted on Akira."

"Really? I think an excellent Device would be perfect for someone who enjoys Tuning so much."

"Enjoys it, hm? You were with her last night, weren't you? How was she?"

"She was fun."

"That so?"

"Yeah, the European Tuners I know were…rough people who would deal with a destroyed house by letting it blow away in the wind. The dogs, cats, and birds yesterday were pretty amazing."

Gunmal sounded like he was enjoying himself, but there was no smile in his eyes.

He actually chose his words carefully for once and spoke slowly as if checking with himself.

"She wasn't using Lives as a toy. To me, it looked like she and the Lives were playing together."

"That's what she does, all right. Her parents were that kinda person too."

"Her parents, huh?" Gunmal's eyebrows moved slightly. "Did her parents know a lot about Death Techno?"

"Sure did."

The General nodded and Gunmal glanced over at him.

"Is there more to that story?"

"Yeah. Why I can't stand the sight of Huang Daquan and why I look after Akira are all a part of that story. You could call it a souvenir from Hong Kong's many Divine Punishment Wars. Maybe I'll tell you about it sometime."

The General almost spat out those last words and then cleared his throat.

And suddenly…

"Gunmal, don't you think you and Akira could make a nice team?"

"…"

Gunmal said nothing, but the General did not care.

"J-Gun said all of Europe's threats – Glossolalians, war, and chivalry – used Tuning and Busting as their weapons. …Is this your first time seein' a Tuner like Akira? Is this your first time seein' some girl playin' with the Lives instead of just usin' Tuning as a weapon?"

"Yes. It certainly is a…"

He started cheerfully, but trailed off, scratched his head, and reworded his thoughts.

"Well… I've changed my view a little."

The General smiled bitterly and nodded.

"Rin wasn't able to do that. …Actually, was it the same with you? I hear you were kicked outta your family."

Gunmal said nothing, but he did silently pick up a half-completed Device from the floor.

It was likely meant to be a sword, but it still looked like an oblong metal panel with the hilt just barely formed.

He sighed while staring at it.

"…"

At the same time, he gently tapped a finger on the spot meant to be the blade.

It was his left pinky, the same finger he had put the ring on.

The ring struck the sword and produced a sound. The ring was a Device.

The elegant sound bent the air and caused a change.

"…Mh?"

The General could not help but gasp.

It was not much, but the sword Gunmal held now had a bit of a blade.

"Was that Busting? Device-creation Busting?"

"I can't do anything as high-level as Tuning. I just destroy the Live a little and have it auto-replay. That gives it a resistance to that kind of destruction, effectively strengthening it."

A Buster created items by repeating that process thousands or even tens of thousands of times.

They could not make a mistake on even one of those repetitions.

One wrong sounding of the Live and the half-made Deivce would break. It would become dirt or smoke and it would vanish.

"Hey, old man." Gunmal gave the sword an appraising look. "What does Akira want to do using Tuning?"

"Oh? You haven't heard about the dragons and the Three Laws?"

"Not from her. And like Rin said, the dragons are something from Peking opera. Aren't they several kilometers long and don't they have an Octave in the tens of millions? That's a hell of a lot more than some cats or dogs."

"That's what Akira's tryin' to create."

"Why?"

"You know Hong Kong Cave, right?"

Gunmal nodded, so the General explained.

"It's rumored in Hong Kong that the biological weapons from the Second and Fourth Divine Punishment Wars still linger in Hong Kong Cave. So Akira…" He took a breath. "She wants to Tune everythin' in and around that ruined cave, turn it into a dragon, and return it to what it once was. People think the place is full of bacteria, so by sweepin' it all away, she thinks the Nein Engels can start comin' to the surface and the humans can start goin' into the cave."

"I see."

"But recently, Akira's stopped talkin' about that kinda fantasy. It might be because people like me used to tease her about it so much."

"There's no helping that," said Gunmal.

This time, the General asked a question.

"Gunmal, do you have somethin' you want to do?"

The answer he received was simple.

"I can't say."

He must have felt that was not enough because he said more.

"But, well… It's nothing as grand as Akira's dream."

There was some disgust in his voice and he passed the barely-made sword to the General. As soon as the older man casually accepted it, his hand sank down.

He adjusted his grip and lightly touched the blade. Once he checked the feel of the weapon, his expression quickly changed.

"This is Emblem Stone, ain't it? That's no mere steel. You need to use an Octave of at least a million to work on it."

He looked to Gunmal's left hand. His flesh-and-blood left hand.

"When you used your Device, you used the false right hand in that glove, didn't you?"

Gunmal replied with a self-deprecating sigh, but something else cut them off.

"Hey, General, Gunmal. You two here?"

Someone stepped into the workshop.

It was Kouga.

"What is it, Kouga?"

"Rin had the Tune Emblem I saw analyzed and the results just came in, so I thought I'd pay you two a visit."

"What? Can't we just have another meeting at the Yard?"

"Not when this is something that could destroy Hong Kong. That Tune Emblem requires an Octave of 40,960,000 to use and it's seriously gonna activate. And four of them at once!"

After Kouga gave his explanation in a single breath, the young and old men exchanged a glance.

"Four at once? What on earth are you-…"

Just as Gunmal was going to say "talking about", he raised his head.

"…?"

"What is it, kid?"

He did not reply to the General's call and turned toward the workshop entrance.

"Akira's Live? And was that my brother's?"

Gunmal's gaze was fixed on the outside light entering through the rectangular workshop door.

He could of course only see a section of blue sky boxed off by four pointed corners.

The General and Kouga looked in the same direction.

The distant gray buildings of Tsim Sha Tsui were visible below the blue sky.

“What is it?” asked Kouga while tilting his head.

At the same time, a rumbling reached them.

“!?”

It sounded like distant thunder.

The workshop creaked a bit and black smoke rose into the sky above Tsim Sha Tsui.

“The hell’s that!?”

By the time the old man cried out, the two young men were on the move.

Gunmal had already pulled Nein König from below his coat.

Interlude 3

One room still had power below the abandoned Archs RDC building.

The small living space was surrounded by white plastic walls.

Inside, Double Lee had set down a travel bag and a Device sword.

He removed his Nein Engel coat without it catching on his six wings and tossed it onto the provided chair.

“Returning to the location you have abandoned really is the perfect way to hide without being found.”

He sounded self-deprecating as he opened the bag and pulled out the pile of papers he usually had in his pocket.

These were the instructions from Huang Daquan that were not quite a will.

He placed them on a table sticking out of the wall and his expression changed slightly.

He frowned and looked up at the ceiling and the unseen surface above.

“So the battle has begun.”

He eventually lowered his gaze to the papers on the table and a small smile appeared on his lips.

“Just as you said, Master Huang, everything is shifting out of place, bit by bit. Once J-Gun died and that shift began in earnest, I was finally able to believe everything you told me. That you and my parents saved Hong Kong’s destiny.” He took a breath. “That until then, you did not even have the Flight Song, the song meant to save this city. And…the reason you died of the same illness as my parents when you supposedly had no lifespan.”

He added “it is still hard to believe, though” below his breath and looked around the room.

It was an undecorated room.

The clock on the wall had a calendar embedded in the face which said it was June 16.

Double Lee stared at that date and nodded.

“If we complete today’s ceremony, the time limit for the final repatriation ceremony is in two weeks on the thirtieth when Hong Kong is returned to China. We need to hurry if we want to make it in time.”

Silence fell once he was done speaking to himself.

He tapped a finger on the table for a few seconds and closed his eyes.

He focused his ears on the battle on the surface.

He listened to the battle caused by people he knew.

Act 7: A Tell (Ether) (7:21)

Part 1

Black smoke rose into and flew through the blue sky.

Some flames were mixed in and many different sounds came from Tsim Sha Tsui's Chatham Road below.

It was an ensemble of uncountable shouts, screams, and metallic crashes. And all of that must not have been enough noise because a metallic sound resembling a loud shouting voice joined in.

It was the sound of a double-decker bus breaking apart.

A massive hole covered both lanes on one side of Chatham Road and the bus had fallen in.

The sounds of destruction linked with one's imagination and two people were able to sigh from a vantage point giving them a view down.

"It looks like something from a movie."

That slightly out-of-place comment came from Rin as she tried to catch her breath.

"They really are violent," agreed Akira. "I wouldn't do it like that at all."

Both of their voices were somehow stiff and located somewhere up high.

They had "escaped" by flying straight up from the hole and onto the roof of a dozen or so story department store on Chatham Road.

Akira glanced over at Rin who was peering down from the edge of the building.

"That was close, wasn't it?"

Rin nodded while still catching her breath and she pulled a combat knife from her pocket.

“You sure carry a lot of weapons around.”

Rin did not respond, but she did produce a voice.

It was a fairly low, undulating sound.

“Lu.”

This was Rin’s Live.

As she produced the voice, she pressed the knife against the back of her own neck.

A moment later, a small orange bird flew from her body.

The bird frantically flapped its wings and ran along the rooftop without flying.

It was a Live of impatience.

After driving it from herself, Rin sighed.

“It was close. If you had been just a little slower with the Tuning, you wouldn’t have been able to deconstruct the flames and we would have been killed. …Look.”

Akira looked in the direction Rin indicated with a jerk of her chin.

That was where the giant hole filled the asphalt road to a ridiculous extent.

The edges of the hole were brightly melted and shimmering heat still rose from them.

The shimmering was very thick, but two men could still be seen standing nearby.

One was a man holding a Device sword and the other was a man with a fully customized body.

Both of them looked around slowly like travelers in a foreign land.

They were searching for something.

“Are they looking for us?”

“Of course not.”

As soon as Rin spoke, J-Gun and Fei began walking.

However, they started toward the opposite side of the road.

The cars in those lanes were worried about the large hole in the ground, but they were still slowly moving along.

Or they should have been.

The orderly current of Lives controlling the road was suddenly disturbed by the two men who cut into those lanes.

The disturbed Lives began with the bright red of screeching brakes.

A double-decker bus slammed on its brakes, blue smoke rose from the tires, and it honked at the two men walking in front of it.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

To make matters worse, the following car crashed into it from behind.

With a metallic crash, the car was knocked backwards and the bus forwards.

And the bus collided with the two on the road.

“Oh, no!” shouted Akira.

Fei briefly turned in her direction as the bus crashed into him.

The destructive Live was not one she wanted to see or hear.

"*That* had to hurt."

"Don't turn away, Akira! Look!"

She kept watching and saw that Fei had not been knocked away despite all the noise.

His body was embedded in the front of the bus as if his feet were glued to the ground.

"You're kidding."

Akira gulped because she saw no change in the faint Live coming from Fei.

"Rin, did that Galgallin go through a Psyche Outer surg-…"

"Wait five seconds and they'll head out."

Due to her harsh tone, Akira glanced over at Rin and found her checking on the Henry Ball she had miraculously not dropped during the explosion.

She was preparing for battle.

Akira did the same by gathering strength in her gut and gripping her Device.

…*This is serious.*

Looking back down at the road, she noticed Lives of fear overflowing from the bus's windows and door. The bluish-white Word Color and trembling Tempo formed a wave as it spilled out.

After a beat, the passengers followed the wave out.

Fei may have been waiting for that moment because the double-decker bus floated up like it was a prop made of paper.

He had lifted it.

And Akira also saw Fei's dried but slightly remaining Live reverberating pure red toward her.

That Live was known as intent to kill.

"Oh, crap. He noticed us."

She pulled back, worked to keep her Live from escaping, and asked Rin a question.

"Rin?"

"Yes?"

"Are you much of a weightlifter?"

"I carry a gun everywhere."

"I'm talking about things much heavier than- Ah! He can throw it!?"

"What is it, Akira!?"

"Don't look down! You'll want to just give up!"

But Rin looked down regardless.

And so did Akira.

The red double-decker bus flew up into the air and instantly arrived over their heads.

"…"

It blotted out the sun for them.

At the same time, it seemed to freeze about ten meters above them.

And once it stopped, it was bound to fall.

“Fly, Akira!” shouted Rin.

“Yes, ma’am!”

Without even hearing Rin out to the end, Akira grabbed the other woman and jumped out into the air.

A fall from that height would be lethal, but she did not hesitate.

She flew out over the road.

She could see Chatham Road below and she felt the wind on her spread wings. With a strong flap of those wings, she supported Rin’s weight and descended.

Almost immediately, a splendid sound of destruction reached them from behind, but Akira did not care.

She had no intention of looking back.

Below, Fei and J-Gun had only just hijacked a convertible stopped at the front of the traffic jam.

“Ah, you thieves!”

Akira’s protest chased futilely after them as the convertible took off.

As she watched it go, Akira glanced backwards for just an instant.

“Rin! Tram!”

Her monosyllabic shout seemed to have gotten through because Rin nodded.

With a large flap of her wings, Akira gently flew along, ignored the panicking roadway, and approached a tram running along the center line.

The tram was moving in the same direction as the fleeing car.

“Now!”

Using Rin's shout as a cue, Akira released the other woman.

Rin fell toward the tram's blue roof from about three meters up and…

"Well, I don't have time to watch."

Akira pursued their enemy without bothering to look down.

She flapped her wings to fly through the air while using her legs as ballast.

She prepared her Device and listened to the wind blowing through the road.

Perhaps due to the smoke, the blue of the wind was somewhat hazy. It looked in a worse mood than normal.

But Akira did not particularly care. She could deal with some small differences now. In fact, a slight disturbance saved her some trouble.

She stabbed the Device's blade into the wind.

As she flew through the sky above the road and held her breath a bit, she began Tuning.

"Oh, you Lives flowing around me with an Octave of 400,000, you monologue of the wind and crying of the air. Can you hear…my Live!?"

And…

She released her Live that began with "la".

It was gentle, but the high-pitched sound contained a rising intonation.

The clear reverberation flew as a song and Tuned the wind's Live into that of a bird.

The miracle was complete in only four seconds.

"Go!"

The bird of blue wind spread its two meter wings the instant it was born and it flew.

It charged straight toward the convertible racing on ahead.

The bird would become a shockwave once it hit and it had enough power to stop the car.

It was about twenty meters away which would take about five seconds at the bird's speed.

J-Gun reacted to it with his back to Akira.

He slowly stood up atop the convertible's trunk and he swung his Device while turning around.

The slight hint of his Live shook as if trying to convey something.

…That's the same shaking as an Over Up.

That fact gave Akira a chill.

Meanwhile, J-Gun did not utter a word as he released a Live beginning with "oh".

It was low, but its Tempo was sharp and straight instead of groaning. The Word Color was the red of offense and it was shaped in the bent half arc of a sickle.

"!"

The strike smashed Akira's bird.

And…

"Get down, Akira!"

Rin had a good reason for her advice that was less relevant for someone who could fly.

J-Gun's attack had done more than just destroy the bird; it continued toward Akira as a destructive Live.

Akira could see the red destructive sound.

"Wah!?"

The red Live approached before her surprised eyes.

But then it burst.

That was thanks to Rin's anti-demon round fired from behind.

The sound of the red Live scattering was very much like breaking glass.

Both the Live and the anti-demon round's spear of light shattered and scattered throughout Hong Kong's wind.

But Akira did not overlook those smaller Lives.

She frowned, rotated her Device, and gathered together all of the Lives scattering in the wind.

…An anti-demon round and J-Gun's Live! …This is pretty heavy.

"But…I can't allow this!"

Akira raced forward again and gathered up the Lives of the wind with her Device.

At the same time, Chatham Road took a shallow curve to the right and the coastline came into view. The valley of buildings would end in another five hundred meters, so this was the time to settle things.

"Oh, you Lives dancing around me with an Octave of 1,120,000, you rumblings of power, roars of wind, and announcements of destruction! Can you hear my Live!?"

It took her a few seconds to call in the greatest Octave she could manage.

A giant spear shining a bright red resided in her Device.

It was at least five meters long, but she did not have time to appreciate it.

She swung the Device and immediately fired it.

“Hit them!”

“Wait, you idiot! Don’t kill them!”

Rin’s wish was granted. The spear was on the level of a tank’s gun, but it flew toward the convertible’s trunk instead of directly at J-Gun.

Meanwhile, J-Gun raised his Device to eye level and lowered his stance.

He planned to block the spear that was over twice his height and not even aimed at him.

“Are you suicidal!?”

Rin’s question was well deserved. That spear included J-Gun’s own Live, so attacking it would have the same result as punching himself with his own fist.

The reflexive echoing of his own Live would destroy him.

However, he made no attempt to escape.

Instead, he opened his mouth, and gave a powerful Task for the first time since being resurrected.

“Ohhhhhhh!”

His Device responded to the bestial roar escaping his throat.

He did not hesitate to radially amplify the Live and it gained a scarlet coloration much more vivid than mere red. It was a wave of killer intent.

Its Tempo was that of a high-pitched shaking and its size was massive.

“An Octave of more than two million!? And it’s still growing!?”

That was an inarguably abnormal size.

The solid murderous intent was instantly amplified until it filled the entire road.

The spear Akira had fired slammed into that Live and shattered.

J-Gun’s own Live and the wind’s Live were included in the spear, but they were both immediately destroyed.

She could not hear the destruction of the three Lives. Only the sound of the destructive Live filled her surroundings.

This destructive power was on an entirely different level from before.

The destruction did not even allow for any kind of reflexive echoing.

“Was he not serious before!?”

As if to answer her question, J-Gun held his Device low and then quickly swung it upwards.

It fired a Live shell large enough to fill the road and it was aimed at Akira.

"!"

She did not even have time to scream.

…*Not good!*

She pulled a Discord Bomb from her pocket and threw it toward the scarlet Live that approached like a solid wall.

At the same time, she twisted her body, kicked off the air, and flew straight down. The enemy's attack had been fired toward her as she flew, so she could only escape by heading down toward the ground.

The Discord Bomb exploded and its shockwave Live struck the scarlet Live to cancel it out.

The sound of impact was intense, but it proved meaningless.

The Discord Bomb's shockwave burst, released a black Word Color, and was swallowed up.

Meanwhile, the scarlet Live flew onwards while still roaring.

Akira remained in midair and had yet to escape.

"…!"

She gave a voiceless shout and moved down with all her might.

It was decided by a paper-thin margin.

The scarlet Live grazed her wings. Just as she felt a slight heat, some pain reached her and a few of her white feathers were pulled out.

But that was all.

…*Did I make it!?*

As soon as she wondered that, her right shoulder slammed into the asphalt.

"Ow!"

She had sent herself downwards, so she did not take too much damage and she could keep going.

She frowned, quickly got up, and raised her head.

Once her vision rose, she saw something shocking.

Part 2

All of the cars, people, voices, winds, and Lives were trying to escape Chatham Road.

The overall flow was rushing away to avoid danger.

However, there was one form flying into the center of the danger.

It was a motorcycle with two men onboard.

Kouga held the handlebars and Gunmal sat on the back with a Device sword resting on his shoulder.

The bike was Kouga's. It was apparently from the Honda CB series, but it had been modified so often that its original form was all but lost. It was currently racing forward while blasting its six tone horn.

It was fast.

It was clearly exceeding the speed limit. In fact, it was going nearly triple the number designated on the signs.

It would occasionally run across a bump in the road and the back would hop violently up and land again.

The back wheel would slide a bit before it accelerated again.

“Hey! I’m not sure if I should call it ‘a little’ or ‘a whole lot’, but aren’t we going too fast here!?” asked Gunmal.

The wind distorted Kouga’s face and he did not turn around as he answered.

“Don’t worry. People used to call me Swift Skanda, you know!?”

“Wait, wait, wait. Where are you even from!?”

“What? You hadn’t heard? I was born and raised on the puny island nation next door.”

His words were blown away by the wind and he tilted to the left.

“We’re about to turn!”

“Wah!”

Gunmal could not keep up with Kouga’s movements, but his voice was swept away as the bike cut across the road and into the opposing traffic.

Two cars were coming their way, side by side.

“Wahh! I think you took a wrong turn!”

“No, this is perfect!”

Kouga shouted as he twisted the accelerator and sent the bike even further forward.

The racing machine made its way in between two of the lanes.

“Lean back!” he told Gunmal as he pulled on the handlebars.

He could feel Gunmal lean back in the seat behind him and the front wheel rose just a bit.

And like that, they charged in between the oncoming cars.

The wind slammed into them and produced a low sound much like flesh being struck.

The raised handlebars passed above the cars' side mirrors.

They passed by in an instant with a relative speed of over two hundred kph.

The wall of wind it produced was enough to lightly tear at their clothing but not enough to knock them over.

They passed through the wall of wind.

"!"

The front wheel landed and their speed dropped a little.

Kouga leaned forward to press the shaking front tire against the road and then accelerated again.

Or he meant to.

"Hey! Why'd you head into the opposite lanes!?"

"Look to the right!"

Kouga could see a traffic jam filling all four lanes of the road on the right.

"If we went that way, we'd have to keep doing that wheelie over and over."

"Okay, got it. Your decision was horribly wrong yet right."

More cars came their way, so they swerved back and forth while breaking through the waves of wind they produced.

Soon, they saw the cause of the traffic jam in the right lanes.

It was a giant hole.

"Gunmal! What is that!?"

“It’s artistic is what it is.”

“The road was destroyed!”

As soon as Kouga shouted that, a shadow enveloped the two of them.

Something was falling towards them.

“!?”

Kouga reflexively looked up and saw an unbelievable red object above them.

“Why is a double-decker bus falling from the sky?”

“Don’t look back!”

After Gunmal’s harsh cry, Kouga tensed his body and faced forward.

A moment later, the great pressure vanished from overhead, as did the shadow threatening to crush them.

“!?”

Kouga looked back and saw Gunmal holding his Device in his flesh-and-blood left hand.

“Gunmal!? What did you just do!?”

“Shut up! Just keep going!”

Kouga almost said something else but decided against it.

Instead, he shook his head a bit and sighed.

He then gathered some different words and let them out into the wind.

“It’s not often you get serious. …Are you worried about Akira?”

“I still haven’t heard her answer.”

"Her answer? Did you confess to her?"

Gunmal did not reply.

Instead, he muttered some other words into the wind.

"This really takes me back. I keep hearing Lives of fear."

Part 3

Akira watched as the city fell apart.

The scarlet Live flying her way tore through the center of a fifteen-story park hotel located along the road.

The white building was destroyed in an instant.

"…!"

The smashing of the stone, metal, and glass mixed together into a rumble much like that of a waterfall.

And it did not end there.

Perhaps due to colliding with the massive object, J-Gun's Live literally exploded.

Briefly, a near-indescribable smell of sweet fire hung in the air.

Immediately afterwards, a deep sound was let loose.

The four or five buildings around the park hotel collapsed from the speed of the blast.

The multiple roars resonated with each other and numbed Akira's ears.

The smoke of the scarlet killer intent wrapped the buildings in red flames.

…What is this?

Akira watched on while kneeling on the asphalt, but…

"Akira! Ahead of you!"

Rin's voice brought her back to her senses.

The enemy's convertible was stopped up ahead and J-Gun was no longer standing on top of it. The Galgallin named Fei was there instead.

…*What is he going to do!?*

Her question was immediately answered.

Just as when they had met underground, he raised his arm and a mortar jutted out.

White light was already gathering in the barrel.

…*Heat!?*

Just as Akira realized what his attack was based on its Live, an explosion shook Hong Kong for the third time that day.

"!"

Heat lost all color once it reached a certain temperature.

It would roast the air and only contain the color white.

That was the identity of the white pillar that shot horizontally along Chatham Road.

"Kyah!"

She did not have time to dodge.

The white heat filled both sides of the road and vaporized the asphalt.

"You goddamn idiot!!"

A man's shout collided head-on with the mass of pure white heat.

The clash was settled in an instant and it ended with a surprisingly refreshing sound of steam.

Fei's heat projectile had been utterly destroyed.

"!?"

It had all happened in an instant.

The white heat, the intent to kill, and everything else had vanished and it had all become a still wind.

Only the melted road remained up ahead.

The melted portion ended less than ten meters ahead of Akira, but she could no longer detect even a hint of heat.

The heat Live had been destroyed and she saw its many pieces floating through the air and vanishing.

"…"

She was speechless.

She had her Device raised as if to Tune because she had instinctually prepared to Tune the heat Live as it flew toward her. She could also tell her fingers were stiff with tension.

She checked and found that Fei and J-Gun had vanished from the road up ahead.

The convertible was gone too, so they must have escaped.

However, she no longer had the energy to give chase.

Strength left her body and she sighed.

She trembled and almost succumbed to the desire to drop her spear Device and fall to her hands and knees, but she just barely managed to move her wings and withstand that exhaustion.

She then looked to the destruction before her eyes.

"That's unbelievable. And…"

…They eliminated it in an instant.

All she knew was that a powerful Live had flown in from behind.

It had been a shockwave produced by the action of "slicing the air".

The Live had been produced with a strange sort of Busting and not many people could pull it off.

"…"

To confirm her suspicions, she turned around.

There, she saw the tram Rin rode on stopped in the road.

Kouga sat atop a thoroughly modified motorcycle, and next to him was…

"Gunmal."

He stood with his Device in hand.

…Did you eliminate that just now?

He did not answer.

He only smiled bitterly, looked her way, and said something else.

"Thank goodness. Are you alive?"

He asked in his usual tone.

And as always, his Live was hidden from view.

Act 8: Talk Show (6:18)

Part 1

The white-walled meeting room on Hong Kong Yard's second story was large enough to fit two hundred people.

It was designed much like a university lecture hall and it was indeed being used for a lecture.

A teacher and assistant stood on the stage up front where their voices could reach everyone else. Rin and Kouga wore their Yard uniforms in front of the large display they were using instead of a blackboard.

And if there was a teacher, there had to be students. About eighty percent of the meeting room's seats were filled.

The model students did not utter a word or produce any noise at all and, other than the police superintendent acting as the director, they were all from field units. There was a total of one hundred fifty eight from the Tank Force, the Custom Force, the Ninja Force, and the Hounds.

They were all prized members of the Yard and they displayed their diligence by filling the front half of the meeting room's seats.

On the other hand, Akira, Gunmal, and the General sat on the very back row.

They all silently listened to Rin and they were taking this seriously.

After all, Rin started with this:

"I am mainly here to explain the process by which Hong Kong will be destroyed and sent up to heaven."

She then began talking about World War Two.

"You are all familiar with Aerial City's self-sacrifice, I assume. At the end of the war, the Germans fired a Wort Bombe at England. To save

England, the bomb was taken to heaven and heaven was utterly destroyed."

She went on to say that the Nein Engels were attempting to Tune Hong Kong, carry it up to the destroyed heaven, and create a new heaven.

From there, her explanation continued to build.

"If Hong Kong's Kowloon is seen as the center, then the Tune Emblems in question have been drawn at the northwestern Tsing Yi Island, the southwestern Lamma Island, and the southwestern Beaufort Island. Also, Earth Burns have been seen in the ocean near those islands."

A map of Hong Kong appeared on the large display behind Rin and red circles expanded from three points on it.

"Based on the size of the Tune Emblems, Earth Burns made from Lives with an Octave of 40 million have already fused with the land within these red circles."

The three red circles seemed to pin down the map and they were each about ten kilometers across. The three of them covered most of Hong Kong.

If they became dragons and suddenly ascended into the sky, the casualties would be more than just one or two hundred thousand.

Everyone gave a stiff gasp, but a voice broke that tense atmosphere.

"Hey, Rin."

The casual, questioning tone came from the General.

"There's somethin' I don't get."

"Yes, I had a feeling you would ask about this."

"Quit flatterin' me," he said before continuing. "Well, I'll start with just one thing. If someone made these three Earth Burns, then why'd they

only have them swim in the ocean and disappear on the night those dragons were spotted?"

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, one more. With Tunin', the Lives'll end up back here even if they are taken up to heaven. Tune arrangements are nothin' but healin' after all."

"I see." Rin gave a deep nod to show she had understood his questions. "The answer to that is found in J-Gun's Devices that the Nein Engels wanted and in how Huang Daquan died. Why did they create four identical Devices and yet want another device now? And where did Huang Daquan's blood end up?"

She continued.

"When the Tune Emblems were activated and the Earth Burns appeared, one of those Devices was driven into each of them. The blades must have been soaked in the blood just like the Tune Emblems…and those were J-Gun's Devices which could withstand an Octave of several dozen million."

She turned toward the large display just as a new circle appeared.

It was centered on the eastern Kowloon Peninsula, near Hung Hom.

Its position created a square with the previous three circles.

The four red circles covered almost everything.

Rin turned sideways to let everyone see the screen.

"The Earth Burns obeyed the Message of their creator and vanished into the sea before their bodies could fully develop, but that was to use a Bust System."

"You mean the four elements of wood, fire, earth, and water, plus the element of metal that is created from the combination of the other four?" asked Gunmal. "So my brother's Devices acted as the key to the three

Earth Burns and they will…um, resonate with the ceremony to bring out an Earth Burn in that new circle in Hung Hom, which will Tune all four Earth Burns at once?"

"Yes. The identical Devices will act as a resonating whistle. …But that isn't all."

"?"

"You said the element of metal is created when the other four are combined, right? We should assume the ceremonies they've completed or will complete correspond to those four elements." Lamma Island's rainforest land made it wood.

Tsing Yi Island's name meant "blue clothes", so it was water.

Beaufort Island's bare volcanic rock made it earth.

And Hung Hom's thermal power station was fire.

Symbols of the four elements had been gathered.

And that meant…

"If the four dragons are Tuned here, the foundation needed to activate the element of metal will be created at the central point! Look, if these four elements are activated, what land is left!?"

Rin indicated a single point on the large display.

It covered the Kowloon Peninsula from the center to the very end.

"Hong Kong Cave."

"!"

A stir ran through the audience like a wave.

But…

"Don't panic!"

Rin's shout eliminated the stir and silence returned.

But this silence was different. The audience was intentionally suppressing any noise and Rin's voice soon reached them.

"Look carefully. How much power will the metal Live have as it ascends along the path created by the other four elements?"

As soon as she spoke, an even larger red circle appeared over northern Hong Kong Island on the map.

It encompassed the other four circles and grew even larger.

"Wait, wait, wait," said some of the Yard members, but the circle only continued to grow.

"The Four Elements Acceleration of the Tune System squares the power of a single element, so some simple math tells us that all land within a one hundred kilometer radius will be Tuned as an Earth Serpent!"

The circle did not just cover Hong Kong Island, the large Lantau Island to the west, and the Kowloon Peninsula. It also included a portion of the ocean and China.

"Using a form of Death Techno, Huang Daquan's blood was used to fill the dragons with the power of Yang, a heavenly element, so even if the Tuning is dispelled, it will not return to the earth. …Heaven will be restored and Hong Kong will be destroyed."

Everyone silently listened to her and looked at the screen.

But Rin only lowered her head slightly and smiled.

"Sorry for frightening you," she began. "This is why I summoned you here today. Do you all understand the nature of the mission given in the documents you hold? Do you understand why we are breaking into Hong Kong Cave when even the governor continues to ignore it and everyone writes it off as 'nonexistent' or 'outside their jurisdiction' due to the past Divine Punishment Wars?"

She took a breath.

“We are up against two of the three secret Tune Bust techniques. If we don’t seal off the four elements today, the metal dragon will eventually activate. …No, it’s sure to happen before the gate to heaven vanishes from Hong Kong’s sky in two weeks’ time!”

With that said, she once more looked to the meeting room’s back row.

No one had said anything, but the Nein Engel sitting there had stood up.

The girl was Akira.

Akira scratched her head and started to leave the meeting room.

The only ones to notice this were the others in the back row and Rin. No one tried to stop her and Gunmal simply watched her go.

She was part of Cleared, so even as a participant, she wasn’t part of a field unit.

Also, Rin had seen Akira’s Live.

Her Live had contained a difficult color that had stopped Rin from calling out to her.

Part 2

“Hey, kid. The meeting’s gonna keep goin’, but what’ll you do? Go after Akira?”

“Well, I have a bit of a thought.”

“And what’s that?”

“To put it in a literary way, my sensible right brain just chopped my impulsive left brain to stop it.”

“Hm. Well, I already knew you were a special kind of person, but how ‘bout you take this more seriously?”

"You sure are rude. What part of me isn't taking this seriously?"

"Every single part of you as a whole."

"Yeah, well, each of those parts is taking it seriously individually."

"Hey, quiet down, you two. …And General, you're supposed to be our leader, so please take this meeting seriously."

"See? You just got her mad at us."

"…"

"…"

"Akira needs to be more honest."

"At this rate, it might crush her."

"Really?

"Yeah. Gunmal, what do you want from her? You hate Bustin' and Tunin', but you still went to save her."

"I'm not trying to use her for anything like you seem to be thinking."

"Really? Then…"

"Then I shouldn't save her? Well, I have to. I still haven't gotten the answer I want from her. Not the whole answer, anyway."

"Answer? What answer?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Just tell me. And if it's an awful joke, I'll kill you."

"What if it's a funny joke?"

"I'll make sure you die."

"Tch."

"You aren't honest either."

"That's what makes me cool."

"Fine, fine. …But try to think about this. This is probably the first time Akira's seen Tunin' used to take lives. …She may be talented, but she wasn't able to protect the city from destruction."

"And even accounting for how nice the Device is, she's still suddenly found out that her brother has gotten powerful enough to summon an Earth Burn. Man, there are a ton of problems for her here, aren't there?"

"It's true Akira has no chance against those Tune Emblems based on what I've seen."

"You sound certain. Do you know something about the Emblems?"

"…"

"Anyway, this city is just filled with mysteries."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Like why you and Akira's old man have the exact same scar on the cheek."

"Hu and I are different people."

"I thought as much. The glimpses I've seen of your Live don't show any compassion toward Akira and she said she watched over her old man's last moments with you and Rin."

"…"

"See? It's filled with mysteries. So can you answer me this one?"

"…Hm."

"?"

"It goes back to the Fifth Divine Punishment War twenty five years ago."

"Yeah, you mentioned that in the workshop. The Fifth Divine Punishment War was a fight started by Hong Kong's mafia and it was led by a British spy, so it goes back to Hong Kong's scheduled return to China, right?"

"Sounds like you don't know what that British spy was tryin' to accomplish with all that."

"You don't mean…"

"I do. There's an original version of that Tune Emblem and it was created by Lee Hu and Luna Azuel, Akira's parents."

"!?"

"Well, a lot happened. Officially, they were makin' a local destruction Tune Emblem to use in the battles against the Chinese military. But Hu and Luna ended up tryin' to seal it away. They fought a lot to that end…and they were fightin' against Huang Daquan."

"Against Huang Daquan? That big shot of the financial world…and the underworld?"

"They had their reasons. Hu, Luna, and Huang ended up steppin' into a realm I never could. It was that fight that caused Huang to age all at once like he did and it also made Hu quit the Yard and Luna quit Tunin'."

"Did Akira and her brother inherit something of theirs?"

"How should I know? But I do know the last thing Hu said after comin' up to the surface that last time: 'This city will eventually connect heaven and earth.' He also asked me to look after the children who would follow him."

"…"

"I have no idea what's goin' to happen to Hong Kong. …J-Gun said you'd be the one to save the city, but make sure you at least protect Akira."

"Hm."

"…How 'bout it?"

"Well, I think it should work out. I am kind to women after all. But only if they're no older than twenty-eight and no younger than sixteen."

"If it weren't for that flippant side of you, I might be able to trust you."

"Shut up. That's just who I am. …Oh, it's this late already?"

"Hm?"

"I was just thinking I should get going to Akira's place."

"Why are you goin' after her now?"

"I thought it would be best to give her some time first. …I like to calculate everything out."

"It doesn't look that way to me."

"That's cause I was just kidding. …Well, good luck, old man."

Part 3

It was four in the afternoon and the sun was starting to sink.

The wind blowing in from the sea had vanished and a wind blowing in from the mainland replaced it. The scent of greenery and sand filled that thick continental wind.

The wind was stronger in elevated places and it dropped down from those heights at night.

In Hong Kong, the wind was strongest and night fell fastest on the roof of the former Archs RDC headquarters.

Someone there was experiencing the faint Live of the night with his entire body.

A six-winged Seraph stood on the railing at the edge of the roof and his shallow gaze stared into the distance.

He was Double Lee.

He faced forward and he stood firm despite the wind.

He was looking to Hong Kong Cave, that great hole in Hong Kong Island across the distant ocean.

The Nein Engels lived there and no one else ever set foot inside.

Tilted shadows bordered the entrance to the hole thanks to the angled light of the sun.

Double Lee held a hand to his forehead as if the sun was getting in his eyes, but he suddenly thrust that hand forward.

He then swept the hand to the side as if scooping something up.

“Not enough,” he muttered while clenching his fist. “And yet I sought heaven as I had promised.”

He stopped speaking there.

He closed his eyes a little and turned around just in time for another Nein Engel to descend from the sky.

The four-winged Nein Engel was Genius.

She alighted on the rooftop and looked up at Double Lee.

“Everyone has finished moving. They have all escaped through Hong Kong Cave’s underground tunnels. The boats all left Hong Kong

Island's western port almost simultaneously half an hour ago. They should be in position in another two hours."

"I see." Double Lee nodded. "They will not be used to the boats and, when looking through the list, I saw the elderly Zhu family on Boat D4. Make sure they link the boats as instructed before heading out to sea."

"Understood. ..Also, the Yard called an emergency meeting."

"Ignore it."

"What will your sister do?"

"Oppose us, I would imagine."

His emotionless tone led Genius to ask something else.

"You said that before, but are you actually hoping that will happen?"

He did not answer.

Instead, he turned his back on her, so she spoke to the six white wings spread before her eyes.

"Hey, I have another question. To resurrect someone using necromancy, you need to remind their soul of something they regret or have left undone. …What did you tell J-Gun's soul?"

"Fei performed the necromancy, not me."

"Someone who underwent a Psyche Outer surgery couldn't persuade a soul. You must have told him what to say. For example…"

She took a breath.

"Maybe you were giving him a chance to get back at the younger brother who was more skilled than him."

"So what if that was it? If we had not resurrected J-Gun, our plan would have fallen apart. We are willing to use any means necessary for our plan, aren't we?"

"How can you say that!?"

She just about said more, but something stopped her.

Double Lee spoke in a lower and calmer tone than hers, but there was much more power hidden below his words.

"Genius, do you think every question needs an answer?"

"Eh?"

"Long ago, some people asked a great question but were unable to come up with an answer. Sadly, they fell in love with the same woman and then fought to save Hong Kong."

"…"

"But they did not entirely succeed and Hong Kong was left in its current state. …And while hoping the future would find true salvation, they died without finding their answer. It is a truly hopeless fact," he muttered. "All that remained was that great question and a great answer that is all too difficult to reach."

As he spoke, Double Lee took a step forward.

He moved as casually as someone heading out on a stroll, but in so doing, he entrusted himself to the sky.

"Genius, it is about time to get ready. We need to hurry."

With those words, he spread his six white wings which shined in the light of the setting sun.

Interlude 4

The color purpled filled the sky.

Night was fast approaching. Scattered lights covered the city and the bustling movement of the streets was different from that of the daytime.

But even in Hong Kong, one area attempted to gain the stillness of night: the public graveyard of Kowloon's administrative district.

The British-style graveyard was mostly covered by grass and had no lanterns. The only lights were those in the sky.

There was some slight sound there.

It was music played in the high notes of a sanxian.

The music rang long and short from near the center of the park filled with rows of gravestones and crosses.

A girl with white wings was playing the instrument and she sang the lyrics of the Flight Song.

"彼街通天地

"墜朝地仰雲

"昇夜空謳月

"惟望再笑君"

Akira's high-pitched voice flowed and resounded with the notes of the sanxian…but then it stopped.

"…"

Once she finished singing, she placed the sanxian in the grass.

With a sigh, she turned around to face the polished slab-shaped gravestone there.

The brown stone was engraved with two names: those of her parents.

"I can't believe this," she said quietly while touching the gravestone.

…For once, I really am not sure what to do.

Her slender fingers stroked the smooth stone surface, but she suddenly stopped.

"…"

Her fingertips wrapped around her father's name and she asked a question.

"Gunmal? …You're here, aren't you?"

Her question led a figure to move along the grass.

The figure sighed and spoke in an exasperated tone.

"How did you know? I was suppressing my Live even more than usual."

"It wasn't your Live. I just thought you were probably there."

Akira turned around and found Gunmal there.

She then asked him a question with her thoughts.

…Why are you here?

"Why do you ask?"

"Because it would seem a little too contrived if you were just here by chance."

"Too contrived? Isn't there a better way of putting that?"

He smiled bitterly and sat on the grass to put him at eye level with her. His blue eyes looked down to the sanxian next to her. She could not read anything from his still gaze.

"My dad taught me how to play that."

Hearing that, he looked up with a hint of surprise on his face.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Well… It's just that you answered the question I was thinking. …Could you see it?"

She shook her head.

"Of course not. I'm not as talented as you."

"Talented?"

"…Yeah."

…Lately, I've had a lot of opportunities to learn what level I'm on.

"Yeah, you probably would think that right now."

"It isn't just right now. That Tune Emblem uses Yin and Yang Lives, which are two of the secret Tune Bust techniques which include the space-time Lives, and it can even summon a dragon. That was kind of a shock."

"So you feel kind of beaten?"

Gunmal sighed, let his shoulders droop a little, and looked down at the sanxian again.

"That thing sounded nice. …What was that song?"

"The Flight Song. My mom taught it to me."

"Hm, she must have taught you well. And she must have been a good mom."

…What was your mom like?

He did not answer and she sighed.

"You didn't get along."

"Because she pissed me off. I haven't forgotten a thing about those parents of mine."

…What were they like?

He crossed his arms to put on a show of thinking.

"Let's see… I think one was a man and the other a woman. Oh, and I have a feeling they were older than me."

"You idiot. You've forgotten plenty."

"Then what were your parents like?"

"Do I have to answer?"

"You can give a joke answer if you want."

"I can't believe you." She scratched her head. "It's a little complicated. Because of a weird illness, my dad died of old age when he was still young."

…When I was a child, I was separated from them.

"And not long after I left for the surface, my mom died of Balance Fall…I think."

"You think? So she might still be alive?"

"No. She noticed when I snuck out at night. And I found her braided hair on the table as all that remained."

"And that's in here too?"

He turned to the gravestone behind her and the Nein Engel girl nodded.

She then looked at him and eventually started laughing.

"What's with that look, Gunmal?"

"Sorry."

"The General knows about all this too, so it's fine. And my parents left me with more than the sanxian. They taught me about Tuning and plenty of other things, so I'm pretty satisfied."

"About Tuning too?"

"Yes, but didn't I tell you they only taught me that?"

She looked away from him.

…When I was a child, I tried to Tune in a weird way and I was never able to do much.

"A weird way?"

"When releasing your Live, you usually use a single note, but I was singing the Flight Song. My mom told me to learn the basics before using that method, so she taught me how to use the Wind Up method and I just got better and better from there."

"…"

"And that's how I got to where I am now. …But now my progress has stalled."

She stopped speaking there.

…Am I talking too much?

"It's a lot better than sitting in silence."

"Then what about you, Gunmal? You aren't saying anything. Your brother is on the enemy's side, so don't you want to stop him?"

She turned toward him as she asked and their gazes seemed to audibly collide.

The silence lasted three full breaths, but Gunmal finally spoke while still looking her in the eye.

"I'm a pacifist, so instead of fighting…"

He shrugged.

"I prefer love and peace. Watching them from afar is best."

…Are you serious?

Her expression was harsh.

Puzzlement filled his face and he waited for her to speak, so she lowered her head and did so.

"With your talent, couldn't you stop J-Gun?"

"Y'know, if my brother and I went on a rampage, it wouldn't just hurt the city. It would hurt the people living there, us, and everyone else too."

…Aren't you just running away?

"Running away?"

"Yes. And you're using everything around you as a shield."

"I see." He nodded and replied in a rather frivolous tone. "And what's wrong with that?"

Akira briefly bit her lip and suppressed the Live containing the words she impulsively wanted to say. Instead, she chose her words carefully and spoke slowly.

"I think that would be the least of our worries if Hong Kong is blown away. Something much, much worse would happen. And if the Nein Engels go to heaven, they'll never again live alongside-…"

She suddenly stopped saying the words that she seemed to want someone to hear.

Her hand touched the gravestone behind her.

"…?"

She quickly looked up and at Gunmal.

…*Sorry.*

"Hm?"

"I should have been saying all of that to myself."

…*Did you read my Live and play along?*

"Maybe."

He smiled bitterly, reached out, and rubbed her head.

She closed her eyes and let him.

And at that moment, sound raced across the sky.

"!?"

The two of them looked up and saw a Live.

The sound raced by again.

The sound-producing Live was a brilliant red and its Tempo was high-pitched and almost earsplitting.

This was an alarm.

"The fifth alarm!? That's the Divine Punishment Alarm!"

As if to answer Akira's cry, her cellphone rang in her pocket.

She answered it quickly.

"Hello!? This is Akira! …Rin!? Why is the Divine Punishment Alarm going off!?"

"It's an emergency! The Nein Engels have vanished from Hong Kong Cave!"

Despite the blaring alarm, Rin's voice was perfectly clear over the phone's speaker. She seemed to be placing her Live and a powerful Message in her voice.

"They aren't going to wait until the Tank Force gets back! We need to head to the predicted spot! Will you be coming!?"

Akira turned to Gunmal.

…*What should I do?*

He gave a deep nod.

"Don't worry. I'll protect you no matter what happens."

"Y-you idiot. Where did that nonsense come from?"

"Can't you appreciate it a little?"

"Sure, sure."

She smiled bitterly and spoke into the phone.

"I'm coming! Besides…it's a sister's job to stop her brother! Tell me where!"

"The Hung Hom thermal power station in eastern Kowloon!"

Rin then shouted something that truly went without saying.

"Hurry!"

Act 9: Verdict of Normality (3:31)

Part 1

Taking Chatham Road north from Tsim Sha Tsui for twenty minutes on foot brought one to the eastern Hung Hom region of the Kowloon Peninsula.

If the shopping districts such as Tsim Sha Tsui were Hong Kong's face, then this manufacturing district was the city's body.

It was filled with factories and high-class residential areas for the nouveau riche who kept Hong Kong's economy running.

Unlike the shopping districts, the region was filled with bright Lives that lacked any heat.

Or it normally did.

"Wow."

Ma Tau Wai Road cut east to west through Hung Hom. Akira ran east down it with Gunmal and she could not help but voice her opinion of the odd Lives surrounding the streets of Hung Hom.

They were Lives of alarm.

The fifth alarm ringing throughout Hong Kong was transforming the streets of Hung Hom.

Having subconsciously noticed, the people were trying to flee that region.

Cars flooded the roads and the sidewalks were even more crowded than usual. Everyone was moving west, away from Hung Hom and away from the Kowloon Peninsula as a whole.

Their voices were all filled with doubts and unease.

Akira found it hard to breathe under the auditory pressure of their Lives.

…This is harsh.

"Don't you think it's that alarm's fault? Yeah, I can feel it tingling from my brain down to my toes."

"You sound like that makes you happy."

Akira avoided the people while replying to Gunmal's comment. Everyone on the sidewalk carried large bags and a lot of them had children with them. The two ran as well as they could without getting in the people's way.

"Akira, it would definitely be faster if you flew."

"But what about you? You don't know where the thermal power station is, right?"

"Don't worry. I'll ask a police officer to show me the way."

…*And where are you going to find that police officer?*

"There's one right in front of- Hey, don't ignore my clever joke."

"Shut up."

They continued running.

"There aren't any people on the sidewalks anymore. Is it because only the roads are clogged up?"

"Hm. I guess you could say manpower won out over civilization."

"That is *not* what it means. …Oh, we take a left at this signal.

They turned left at the intersection.

They left the show windows and lights of Ma Tau Wai Road and entered a residential street that looked a lot more like a shopping district.

There was a lot of green.

A church came into view on their left. It was the Holy Carpenter Church that the area was well known for. The church had an Anglican and Victorian style and the plaza out front was surrounded by green and filled with…

"People."

Akira heard quiet Lives ringing from the church.

“So they’re seeking salvation from god, are they? Maybe if they pray, they’ll get to go to heaven even if they still die. …Oh, wait. Heaven was destroyed.”

“That’s inappropriate.”

She warned Gunmal while looking up into the night sky.

The destroyed heaven was up there.

It itself was not visible, but she could faintly see its Live. One spot in the sky glowed faintly as if more stars were gathered there than elsewhere. That was likely the chapter title page that acted as an entrance to heaven.

“Restoring heaven, hm?”

She faced forward again and saw a land bridge.

Once they crossed that, they would arrive at the thermal power station.

…We need to hurry.

As soon as she thought that, she heard a mighty blast of a six-tone horn from behind. An engine rumbled in the background.

She looked back while running and saw Kouga riding a motorcycle with…

“Akira! Gunmal!”

It was Rin.

She wore body armor over her usual suit and held a shotgun.

The motorcycle decelerated to match Akira and Gunmal’s speed.

Kouga looked to the two of them in the eye and smiled bitterly.

"Honestly, those clogged streets didn't make it easy. They really need to work on the traffic control around here. What are the cops doing these days?"

"You're one of those cops, you know?" said Rin. "I see Gunmal is here, too. You're a normal civilian, so you didn't have to come."

"Oh, c'mon. As a normal civilian, I've gotta enjoy all the events the city has to offer."

"…I'd call you an abnormal civilian," added Akira.

"Well, I am cooler than average and smarter than the standard."

"Don't forget far more special than normal," cut in Rin while facing forward.

Her eyes were fixed on the thermal power station visible in the darkness.

"Our opponent is probably in there."

"And we're all that showed up? This'll probably make them cry."

After his joking comment, Gunmal looked to Rin.

Akira noticed where he was looking and realized his gaze had suddenly grown a lot calmer and colder than a moment before.

…Is something the matter with Rin?

Gunmal may have heard her question because he spoke.

"Why are you prepared to die?"

"!?"

Akira gasped and Kouga slowed the motorcycle.

Just as they all focused on Rin, she responded.

"Hurry. The enemy is over there."

Her calm voice contained no emotion, but Akira could see her Live. What she saw there was far too unstable to call an emotion.

Part 2

Hung Hom's thermal power station was a four hundred square meter facility bordering the ocean. It contained several reactors that narrowed in the center like a pot.

Four of the reactors were situated in the center of the power station to create a square.

Something like a small park surrounded that square and mercury lamps revealed four figures in that park.

It was the Nein Engel group.

The group contained Double Lee, Fei, Genius, and J-Gun.

They were currently preparing for their ceremony.

"This is the last of Master Huang's blood," muttered Double Lee.

He looked to the ADs, one of the Devices J-Gun had made, which was stabbed into the asphalt.

And his right hand held a glass bottle.

It was their final bottle of Huang Daquan's blood.

He tilted the bottle and poured its contents onto the ADs.

The Device's blade reflected the light of the mercury lamps as the dark red blood slid down it, reached the asphalt ground, and pooled up.

"…"

Soon, the bottle was empty.

And at the same time…

“Word Accel, you Live with an Octave of 80,000!”

After shouting his Over Up, Double Lee grabbed the Device’s hilt.

“Ha!”

He released a slight Live.

And what happened then? Waves formed in the blood creating a puddle on the ground.

The waves spread and produced countless ripples.

The blood was moving.

In places, it spread in a ring. In others, it moved in a single direction. In yet others, it stayed in place. Altogether, it drew circles, lines, and words.

It drew a Tune Emblem.

Fei, Genius, and J-Gun silently watched the Earth Burn summoning Tune Emblem take form.

However, it was hard to say J-Gun was actually watching. There was no strength in his eyes.

He was dead, after all.

And one of them was distracted by his presence: Genius.

She was watching Double Lee create the Tune Emblem, but she was not focused on that. Her ears and other senses were all turned toward J-Gun next to her.

Only her eyes were turned elsewhere.

It looked like she was waiting silently for him to say something to her.

She must have known how it looked because there was a bitter smile on her lips, although it did not leave her lips.

…That would never happen. He's a corpse without a heart.

"Does his presence bother you?"

She looked up in surprise and found Double Lee looking her way.

He had already pulled the ADs from the ground and held it in his hand.

He had finished creating the Tune Emblem.

It would take time for it to be complete as the blood had to dry.

"It really would have been better not to bring him here so he could work on the final Device needed to summon the Earth Serpent, but the enemy has made some…troubling movements."

"I know," said Genius. "The Yard has your sister, J-Gun's brother, and… Fei?"

Fei nodded.

"There is someone from my past. The past I do not know."

"It's strange, isn't it?" said Double Lee. "Long ago, Fei too must have had his acquaintances on the surface."

"Fei…you really can't remember?"

"I have no reason to enter the mental state you would call 'wanting to remember', but it is possible my modified brain tissue contains residual pieces of the information."

Genius looked to the cybernetix plug at the base of Fei's neck which was evidence of his brain modifications.

It was a small plug about the size of a pencil eraser.

It was embedded in his lightly armored body, it was not as large as the ones seen in old B movies, and it was not wired.

"Fei only agreed to join Archs RDC if they Customized his body, right? I remember because it was a pretty big issue at the time."

…Why did he want to erase his memories and emotions?

Double Lee was the only one to answer Genius's thoughts.

"The three of us, no… Master Huang and…all of us are probably the same in that way. We have something that leaves us with a grudge against the surface."

He lightly swung ADs as he spoke.

It was not a powerful swing, but it still audibly sliced through the wind.

And that sound briefly froze the air.

"They're here," said Double Lee. "I can hear their Lives. …There are three…no, four? One of them has an oddly quiet Live. And…ha ha ha."

"?"

"That is the Live of the young man Fei killed before. Ha ha ha. He seems to be a vampire or some other immortal race. In that case, the one near him is his boss and…the last one is Akira."

"That's your sister, right?" asked Genius.

He silently nodded. His expression was the same as always, but she sensed something different about him: she could not see his Live.

She had no idea what he was thinking as she heard him speak.

"So this ceremony will not reveal the answer. …What a shame."

Part 3

The battle had a sudden start.

As soon as the Yard group set foot in the power station, the Nein Engel group began to move.

The time was 7:13 PM.

The night was only just getting started.

Morning Section - Final Act: Rotation (10:32)

Part 1

A certain noise could be heard in the distance: gunfire.

The sharp yet low-pitched tone rumbled through the power station.

Akira and Gunmal heard it as they made their way to the center of the power station.

They heard more gunfire that seemed to match their pace.

"That's Rin," muttered Akira as she jogged along and kept an eye on her surroundings.

Gunmal made long strides next to her and nodded.

"I guess they've already started. …Worried?"

"Well, yes. Especially after what you said earlier."

…That she's prepared to die.

She looked to Gunmal.

His sword Device was resting on his shoulder and he faced forward with a look that made her think he had dropped his tension somewhere. In other words, he was the same as always.

"Hey, Gunmal."

"?"

"Sorry about forcing you to come with me."

…But why are you here?

"Well…"

"And if you say because you ran here, I'll smash your head open."

He trailed off there, so she had apparently guessed right.

"…This stupid guy."

She clicked her tongue and looked to his Device.

It was shaped like a bladeless mixture of a musical instrument and a sword. It was named Nein König and was a lot like him.

"I've been wondering. Did you create that Device?"

"How would I give birth to something like this? I'm not equipped for that."

"I-I didn't mean it like that!"

…If you can make something like that, then why did you quit Busting?

He did not answer her.

He only faced forward and said something else.

"We have some opponents."

She saw them too.

About fifty meters straight ahead, two figures stood before the reactor.

It was a similar group to Akira and Gunmal: a female Nein Engel and a human Buster.

Akira and Gunmal gradually slowed to a walk and then stopped altogether.

Both sides could see each other's faces at that range.

For those who used Lives, they were already within range.

"Long time no see, brother. You're not looking too hot."

J-Gun did not reply.

Instead, Genius spoke next to him.

"Leave, both of you. This is not worth dying over."

"No one said we're going to die."

…Gunmal, is that woman Genius?

Gunmal silently nodded.

"Your beauty's wasted on my mute brother."

"You don't go easy on your own family, do you?"

"Don't worry. I make sure to praise myself."

As soon as he spoke, the mercury lamp next to them burst.

"!?"

The area grew a little darker and the lamp's glass fragilely clattered to the asphalt.

…What just happened?

Akira realized that Genius held a sword and that light was wrapped around the blade.

That light was not a Live; it was actual light.

It slithered up the weapon like a snake and the fine grooves along the blade formed an emblem.

Gunmal whistled lightly.

“Wow. Now that’s SF.”

“What are you talking about, you idiot? She has four wings, so she’s a cherub. That’s the kind of Nein Engel that controls light.”

“Miss Akira? If you’re Double Lee’s sister, you must know how strong I am. No matter how powerful you are in Busting or Tuning, you can’t react to flying light.”

She lightly swung the sword and the light flew like a whip.

She targeted the mercury lamp positioned opposite the previous one.

With a solid sound, this white light also burst.

Gunmal heard the glass falling again and gave Akira a serious look.

“Akira, listen carefully to what I’m going to say.”

“What?”

“I’m a normal civilian, so can I leave now?”

“No.”

“That’s just mean. You said earlier I could leave, didn’t you?”

“Shut up. From now on, I’m going to automatically reject any ideas like that.”

“Fine then. Busting without producing a Live is hard, though.”

With that, he raised his Device in his prosthetic right hand.

"Hey, lady! Where's Akira's brother!?"

"About one hundred meters beyond this reactor. …But you'll have to defeat us first."

"I see," he muttered before changing his tone. "Hey, Akira. Is Tuning fun?"

"What?"

Akira tilted her head at the unexpected question, so he asked again.

"Well, there's a lot to it, but let's keep it simple. Is Tuning fun?"

"W-well, I suppose."

Her answer was vague, but it seemed to convey her thoughts because he nodded.

"I see. Then maybe you can make Busting fun for me."

"Eh?"

"…"

He said nothing.

Like always.

"So you're going to fight?" asked Genius.

Gunmal nodded and so did Akira.

J-Gun did not, but he did take a single step forward.

They all raised their weapons at once and a distant gunshot was their cue to attack.

Part 2

Rin and Kouga were in the power station's courtyard.

It was a gravel-covered space surrounded by school-like buildings.

The buildings were abandoned and all of the windows were dark.

“Is that a security center? Since this is a power station, we can’t do anything too reckless.”

“Where’s the enemy?”

“I don’t know. He can move fast and I saw him moving this way earlier, but…”

“Ahh, maybe we should have stayed on the motorcycle. …I left it right back there, so should I go get it?”

“No. We should stay where we can see each other.”

With that simple reply, Rin looked up and gave a shout.

“Here he comes!”

The two of them split to the left and right.

At the same time, a series of light bursting sounds arrived.

Their feet sent some of the gravel flying and the spot they had just vacated was blown away.

The gunfire was pursuing them.

Specifically, it pursued Rin while scattering gravel everywhere.

It was fast.

…He certainly is confident.

While running, Rin cocked her shotgun and fired once toward the roof she had had seen a figure on before.

Instead of normal shot or a normal bullet, she used a specialized anti-demon round. Unlike those made for handguns, this one did not send out a spear. Instead, it fired a three meter stake made of light.

The barely-aimed bullet flew and burst in every direction once it hit the edge of the roof.

If one carved a deep groove in the tip of the bullet, it would scatter like that.

With the sound of shattering stone, a portion of the roof was blown away and the pursuing bullets stopped.

…Did I hit him? No, I doubt it.

Without stopping her running feet, Rin pressed up against the wall ahead. She looked up and saw pieces of the concrete roof pouring down as powder.

"…"

There was no sign of the enemy.

She used her Tune power to listen for his Live, but it was no use. The residual ringing of the previous gunfire was still too strong, so the area's Lives were still disturbed.

She exhaled, looked down, and saw Kouga behind a tree in front of the opposite building.

When they exchanged a glance, he pointed to the roof over her head and tilted his head.

…So he can't see anything from there either? Did he run away?

"No, it wouldn't be that easy."

She only wished this opponent had fled.

He was a Galgallin with a Custom Body.

"Galgallins are said to be the chariots of heaven, but it looks like that holds true even with a Nein Engel."

She cocked her shotgun as she spoke. She shoved a round into the chamber and loaded it.

She attached a new tube-shaped magazine and counted how many she had left: two.

There were seven rounds in each, so she had twenty-two rounds left, counting those inside the gun.

"And…"

She had her combat knife Device and a handgun inside her body armor. The handgun was a Colt New Service she had received from her father.

It was loaded with the normal light spear anti-demon rounds.

She was ridiculously over-stocked for a normal firefight.

…But will this be enough to defeat him?

Her opponent had a lot of firepower even without considering the advantages of the Galgallin race.

"That Custom Body is dangerous even for one custom made by Archs RDC. Even one of Detroit's virtual Custom Bodies would only be an even match."

Suddenly, Kouga moved behind the tree. He pointed overhead.

"…!"

Rin reflexively fired her shotgun into the sky.

"Ah," she uttered in surprise.

What she saw in the sky was not their enemy.

It was a band of light. The gathering of white points resembled stardust as it flowed through the sky like a river.

She eventually realized it was a group of Nein Engels and the white came from their wings.

These would be a portion of the six hundred Nein Engels who had vanished from Hong Kong Cave.

They had somehow arrived in the sky above Hung Hom where they decorated the night sky like stars.

They looked like angels flying around god and forming a great white wind to decorate heaven.

"Are they waiting for the Earth Burn to fly?"

At some point, the stream of Nein Engels formed a massive white ring in the sky.

Rin's shoulders trembled because it felt like they were looking down at her.

She was certain a similar dance had begun above Beaufort Island, Lamma Island, and Tsing Yi Island as well.

"…"

She shook her head a little and looked back to the rooftop from which the enemy had vanished.

And just as she raised the shotgun again…

"Boss!" shouted Kouga.

Before she could wonder why, she heard a rumble.

It sounded a lot like collapsing rubble.

It was the sound of a great mass being destroyed.

And it came from the wall directly behind her.

"!?"

Their opponent had broken through the concrete wall behind Rin and appeared there.

She could not turn around in time.

Countless stone-like chunks of concrete poured down to crush her. The powdery crumbling sounds continued as they struck her.

And amid that concrete cascade, an attack hit her from the side with the weight of a log.

It was a powerful strike.

The great impact plowed into her and she could not even cry out.

She was only aware that her consciousness cut out.

Part 3

Destruction and rebirth went hand in hand.

This was a standard law, but it normally took a good bit of time.

It could take years, decades, or even centuries for green to return to war-torn land or for a destroyed city to be rebuilt.

However, the battle Akira and Gunmal fought was different.

J-Gun would send out a Live as if swinging a baseball bat and Gunmal would negate it.

Gunmal did not use his own Live.

He would strike the ground with his Device and amplify the Live of the "striking sound" that produced.

And when their colliding Lives broke apart, Akira would Tune them.

She would Tune them into hounds or large birds and sometimes swords or spears.

And sometimes when Gunmal tore the ground away, she would simply remake it into a "wall" that would block their opponent's attacks.

It was Genius's job to destroy what Akira's Tuning created.

The light she fired with each swing of her sword easily pierced through the Tuned animals.

Once destroyed by her light, the animals would immediately return to their original forms.

The torn ground would return to normal and the weaponized air would stabilize.

The cycle of destruction and rebirth was stuck on repeat.

Each time, their aim grew more accurate and their speed increased.

They had a clear division of offense and defense.

Unless they broke through their opponent's defenses, they could never harm them, so all of their attacks had been focused on the defender.

J-Gun's Live did not expand as a sphere. It was a direct attack produced by swinging down his Device.

Gunmal would swiftly "break" it.

Akira would send her Tuning after Genius.

Genius's beam of light would shoot toward Akira's Tuning.

The cycle sped up.

J-Gun attacked, Gunmal defended, Akira Tuned, and Genius fired light.

That sequence grew tighter as it continued.

J-Gun – Gunmal – Akira – Genius.

It gradually grew faster and reached tremendous speed.

Attack, defense, attack, defense, and then attack once more.

It accelerated further.

Light mixed in with the Tuning and Busting.

On the fourteenth cycle, something changed: Akira.

When Gunmal "tore apart" the air and produced a Live, she stuck the tip of her spear in it and Tuned it.

"Oh, you Lives swimming in the 440,000 Octaves around me! You cries of the dirt and excitement of the wind! Can you hear my Live!?"

The Tempo of her "la" was a long and somewhat low andante.

The Tempo rang thrice.

It reverberated nicely through her Device and she focused her feelings.

She sent her Message into the Live and completed her Tuning in approximately three seconds.

She created a normal-sized white tiger. It was not as large as the Qinghu because it had a greater Live density.

“Oh? You’re trying something bigger, are you? Since it’s a tiger…”

“This isn’t the time for lame jokes.”

“Tch.”

Akira smiled bitterly.

“Let’s settle this!”

She sent the white tiger running forward.

Unlike the previous Tunings modelled after small animals, Genius’s light did little damage despite piercing through the tiger. The light was so sharp it simply broke through without breaking apart the dense Live.

The tiger charged in and Genius moved back a little.

“Gunmal!” shouted Akira.

Without responding, he “tore apart” the air.

“Oh, you Lives running through the 240,000 Octaves around me! You roars of the wind! Can you hear my Live!?”

She quickly Tuned that Live to produce a bird that flew after the tiger.

“Go!”

Just as the bird flapped its wings, the tiger pounced on Genius.

"…!"

With a shout that could be interpreted as a scream or a cry of focus, Genius jabbed her sword into the tiger's face.

After a short delay, light raced out from the within the tiger. Genius had likely stabbed the beast and then fired the light from inside.

The white tiger audibly burst.

Akira noticed claw marks on Genius's cheeks and arms.

She was bleeding.

As a fellow woman, Akira felt a little guilty for harming her opponent's face.

…Sorry.

But it was not over.

The bird born from the torn air flew toward Genius.

It charged toward her feet, so even a direct hit would not be fatal.

Akira had no intention of taking the other woman's life; she just wanted to reach Double Lee.

The bird raced through the air and Genius's movements were too slow.

"…"

She tried to raise her sword again while looking at her wounds as if she found them unbelievable.

…She won't make it in time.

But just as Akira realized that, someone else moved: J-Gun.

And he did not use his Busting.

He fired light from his Device.

"!"

That light had the same qualities as the light Genius fired.

It was less powerful than his Busting, but it was sharp and fast.

It instantly sliced through Akira's Tuned bird and the creature scattered into the wind.

"My brother exchanged Lives with you in a Live Session!?"

It was only natural for Gunmal to be surprised.

J-Gun, a Buster, had fired a Cherub's light. And while he had previously been mechanically using his Live to attack, he had done this to protect Genius.

The cycle was broken.

The first to begin anew was not Akira, Gunmal, or even J-Gun.

It was Genius who had already started to raise her sword overhead.

She briefly glanced over at J-Gun and then stepped forward.

She swung down her sword and the light wrapped around it.

"Seaaaah!"

Her voice shook the air despite not including her Live and her light reached Akira in an instant.

"!?"

…It's cold?

A strange sensation raced through various parts of Akira's body.

It was entirely different from the pain she had predicted.

…Am I just imaging this? Did it not hit me?

But then the pain arrived.

Her feathers scattered and her right side split open.

"…!"

She instinctually squeezed her eyes shut.

A deep and sharp pain stabbed through her body as if a thick pin had been driven into her spine. Her heart skipped a beat when the fingers holding her side sank deeper than her skin.

"Akira!"

She opened her eyes at Gunmal's voice and saw a wall in front of her.

…Why is there a wall?

Then she realized why.

It was not, in fact, a wall. It was the ground. She had collapsed without even noticing.

"Kh."

She groaned and got up.

Ahead, she saw the Device she had dropped.

Beyond it, she saw J-Gun and Genius preparing their second attack a distance away.

…Not good.

She moved the hand from her side and reached for the Device.

The bloody hand looked like a stranger's.

To wipe away that feeling, she squeezed the Device tightly in her hand.

And she got up on her knees.

She tried to force her breathing into order so she could Tune, but then she heard a voice.

“You don’t have to fight here.”

It was a horribly cold yet kind and calm voice.

“…Eh?”

She looked up just as Gunmal tapped her shoulder with Nein König.

As soon as he did, a blue Live burst out of her and scattered.

“!?”

Before she could ask what had happened, she found the answer: the pain had vanished from her.

He had Busted the pain Lives in her body to destroy them.

“Thanks.”

He had already lowered the Device a little and faced their opponent.

He had gone completely expressionless.

The look there made her forget her pain, sent a chill down her spine, and yet still showed some emotion.

She had never seen this look on his face before.

“I’ll deal with those two,” he said.

…Can you do that?

He did not answer her question, but he did speak.

“If the Earth Burn is activated, call me. …I’ll give you your next chance.”

…How?

"?"

"How…can you do that?"

He still did not answer. He only stepped forward with lowered Device in hand.

She looked up at his back and prepared her own Device.

She closed her eyes, calmed her breathing, and gathered Message of "herself" that her Live was singing.

…It's really disturbed.

Maybe because of the blood loss, its Tempo was quick yet weak. And she was more than just injured. There was an odd Message in there, too.

…I'm surprised by Gunmal.

Strangely, it was not a bad feeling.

She did not know what to call this Message, but she felt it would be a shame to Tune it away.

…But I need to hurry up and heal myself.

She was driven to do that by the blood that had reached her thigh and the enemy's movements.

She could tell even with her eyes closed that J-Gun and Genius had both begun to move.

Meanwhile, Gunmal was not revealing his Live.

He was defenseless.

However, she did not panic.

“Oh, you Lives within me. You shouts that form my Wild Name. Can you hear my voice?”

She released her Live.

“La.”

It was a gentle yet vivid Tempo and Word Color. It was her own Live that she remembered from long ago.

She sang a Live with some pointed bits.

She amplified her own Live in her Device and felt it reside in the spear tip.

Immediately afterwards, she plunged the spear into her own chest.

The Live, its Message, its Tempo, and its Word Color all echoed through her body.

It was not quite a wave, not quite an impact, not quite a ripple, not quite a vibration, and it covered her with goose bumps.

However, it cooled some of the unpleasant heat covering her.

“!”

She opened her eyes, stood up, and pulled the Device from her chest.

In that instant, a massive Live exploded before her eyes.

Gunmal fought by amplifying a Live of destruction without using any kind of preliminary Up.

She heard him shout.

“Go!”

The exploding Live blew away all other sounds, so she may have imagined hearing his voice.

Still, she obeyed it.

She looked up slightly, took two or three steps, and flew.

Part 4

Akira flew.

She arrived above the twenty meter reactor in the span of a breath and then continued forward.

The floor of the concrete reactor's rooftop released a strangely thick Live of heat and produced a visual shimmering.

…This region is producing the fire element Earth Burn, isn't it?

With that on her mind, she spun her Device around and gathered Lives of wind and heat.

"Oh, you Lives floating in the 1,280,000 Octaves around me. You roars of wind and proclamations of heat. Can you hear my Live?"

She cleared the reactor's rooftop with a single step and gathered quite a few Lives in the process.

The wind was blue and the heat red. She gathered those Lives around her like heavenly raiment and descended from the rooftop.

She saw a small park-like space lit by mercury lamps from all sides.

A Tune Emblem was drawn in the center and someone holding a sword Device stood at the center of the large Tune Emblem.

"Brother!"

Double Lee looked up at her voice.

A look of slight surprise appeared on his face.

…This doesn't look like the start of an emotional reunion.

She put up her guard and he nodded. He had read her Live.

“So you are finally here, Akira.”

He looked up at the night sky.

The moon was visible as the Nein Engels danced.

“Such a lovely moon. Perfect for a reunion of siblings.”

He then asked Akira a question.

“But why are you here?”

She landed and held her spear at the ready as she answered.

“Why? To stop you of course.”

“Are you serious?”

“What do you mean?”

Double Lee laughed when she answered him with another question.

“Interesting. So you didn’t notice on your own?”

His deep laugh continued but suddenly stopped.

After that moment of silence, he spoke directly to her.

“Are you kidding me?”

“!?”

“Do you really think you have any chance against me?”

She tensed up, but only for a moment. She soon squeezed her Device and spoke.

“Stop this. …Can’t you just turn yourself in?”

And…

“Please, brother.”

The brother frowned at his sister’s words.

“You want me to stop this? But this is what father, mother, and Master Huang wanted. …No, not only that. This is what the two of us wanted as well.”

“Stop!” she shouted. “A lot of lives will be lost if you destroy Hong Kong! Don’t you get that!?”

“I do. That is reality. …Did you not think about that when you used to talk about creating a dragon?”

“!?”

“If you wish to stop me, then do it by force. I am a criminal at the moment.”

“Then…take this!”

Akira Tasked herself.

She Tuned the Live residing in her Device.

“La.”

The Tempo was powerful and long. The color was red. The Message in her mind was strong.

After a short time lag, the Live transformed. She felt it happening.

…This will work!

She created something large indeed.

It was a dragon.

The crimson-scaled dragon wrapped around her spear was about ten meters long.

It would be classified as a Lesser Dragon, but it still had proper fangs and horns.

…*Okay!*

She let Double Lee see her thought and raised her spear.

He looked a bit surprised to see her Lesser Dragon and she did not hold back.

She suddenly swung down her spear.

"Go!"

The Lesser Dragon roared as it was released from the spear.

It shook the air as it flew toward Double Lee.

It was fast.

It raced through the air with the speed of something sliding down an icy slope and it raised its head.

It opened its mouth and roared again.

Its red eyes were focused on Double Lee's right arm which held his Device.

He remained silent.

He stared straight at the charging Lesser Dragon and made no attempt to run.

"I see."

All he did was quickly tilt his body and raise his empty left hand.

The Lesser Dragon must not have known how to react because it tried to latch its jaws onto his left arm.

"!"

…Not that arm!

And just as Akira tried to say something…

"Word Accel, you Live with an Octave of 1,280,000."

He spoke quietly and the Lesser Dragon burst.

"What!?"

The tearing sound drowned out Akira's shout of protest.

The Lesser Dragon came apart from head to tail and released the original Lives.

The sound of the dragon's destruction continued as the red and blue Lives scattered into the air.

It took the span of only three breaths for the Lesser Dragon to completely vanish.

Red and black Lives flew and Double Lee remained unscathed. His left arm was still raised overhead as if nothing had happened.

"Targeting my dominant arm? You always were naive."

He slowly lowered his left hand and spread it out before his face.

He wore Device rings on the middle and index fingers.

"I can destroy your Lesser Dragon with Devices this small."

"…"

Akira said nothing, but he must have read her Live because he smiled bitterly.

"What's wrong? I had heard you and the rest of Hong Kong saw you as the city's #1 Tuner."

As he spoke, the scattering Lives of the Lesser Dragon wrapped around him and stayed in place. He intended to Tune the Lesser Dragon he had destroyed.

…Is it coming?

She raised her guard.

"Word Accel, you Live with an Octave of 2,080,000!"

It suddenly appeared above his head.

"The Vermilion Bird!?"

It was a large bird with a burning red Word Color.

He had placed his Message inside the Lives of heat, wind, and the night.

As if flapping its wings, it throbbed with a refreshing yet heavy and deep Tempo and it did nothing else.

"I suppose you wouldn't be able to pull off a trick like this. …Not if you haven't changed in the last three years."

The Vermilion Bird responded to him with a cry.

It was a high-pitched voice.

It then spread its wings.

The vermilion wings were over twenty meters across, so it was more than enough to outdo Akira's Lesser Dragon.

Some yellow and black feathers were mixed in as decorations and the coloration gave a sense of heat and pressure as soon as one looked at it.

The wings moved and produced a sound of flight.

The Vermilion Bird flew toward Akira.

"!?"

It flapped its wings once, glided just off the ground, and prepared its beak. It targeted her torso and would crush her with its wings if she dodged.

…Will I make it in time!?

She did not have time to answer her own question.

She flew while throwing pencil-like Discord Bombs so that they would not scatter.

She flew upwards.

She moved her white wings to fly up the reactor wall behind her.

The Vermilion Bird raised its head and slammed its red wings on the ground to flap them. Its body was small for the size of its wings, so it was launched upwards.

It was not going to let her escape, but then the Discord Bombs exploded.

The Vermilion Bird's body, shoulders, wings, and tail were blown away with the Lives composing them.

The cry that escaped its beak sounded like a scream.

"Did I get it!?"

She looked down from halfway up the reactor.

"!"

The Vermilion Bird was not dead. It moved its wings even harder, broke through the Lives that had scattered from itself, and ascended.

It pursued Akira as if crawling up the reactor wall.

…Not good!

The only place left to escape was the sky, but the bird would be faster than a Nein Engel there. It would catch up and attack her.

So she gave up on escaping.

She reversed her grip on her Device to point it straight down.

Without averting her gaze, she targeted the spot where a Discord Bomb had hit the bird's right shoulder.

That was where its Live was most shaken.

…Its Octave should be lower there!

The contact lasted an instant. It was only long enough for her to take three running steps.

Her spear accurately pierced the enemy's weak point.

She auto-reversed the Live in her Device to read the Vermilion Bird's Live.

She was searching for a Live she knew very well: her brother's Wild Name.

…Leed Lee!

Her heart shouted that Wild Name, which was the key to an individual's Live.

"Oh, you Live with an Octave of 1,480,000…directly in front of me! You shout of heat, roar of wind, and Live of a name with an eternal form!"

It reacted to her call.

The Vermilion Bird's Live lost its balance. The bird gave a small scream during the quick pause.

"Can you hear my Live!?"

That settled it.

"La."

She released her Live and the Vermilion Bird crumbled.

The resistance reaching her spear weakened, she twisted her body, and she passed the bird by.

…I did it!

Just as she was certain of her victory, the Vermilion Bird noisily exploded.

Part 5

"You're kidding!"

By the time she cried out in protest, she had already been slammed into the ground.

The impact made all the bones in her body ache.

At the same time, she heard a hard metallic sound in her hand.

The sensation in her hand told her that her Device had broken.

However, this was no time to be groaning in pain.

"…"

She clenched her teeth, got up, and faced forward.

Double Lee still stood at the center of the Tune Emblem.

"You took far too much time. …Can you not grow any stronger without our mother?"

She started to answer but then froze in place.

The wound in her side had opened a little. Blood was flowing and spilling out once more. She reflexively threw aside the broken spear and held her side.

The liquid wetting her hand felt like warm oil.

Still, she faced her brother.

She did not look up or down at him. She looked straight at him.

Her brother responded with a bitter smile.

"With that look in your eyes, you would think I was in the wrong here. …As a Tuner, you should have better judgment."

…*About what?*

"Both Tuning and Busting are not just for fun. Have you never heard about the past wars? These are true weapons meant to kill."

He slowly raised the sword Device in his hand.

After gently, gently raising the straight line of silver light overhead, he took a breath.

His eyes were looking to the center of the Tune Emblem at his feet.

"…!"

Akira stood up and tried to run.

…*I have to stop him!*

Double Lee watched her take the first step.

Their gazes seemed to audibly collide.

"Move!"

The Live carrying his voice knocked her out of the way. In the span of a breath, she was knocked back to the reactor and her winged back slammed into the wall.

She felt the impact and the pain while also hearing a dry sound much like a breaking branch. Her main right wing and the small, deformed wing had broken.

"…!"

She grimaced but still faced forward as Double Lee spoke with his Device still raised.

"This is not something someone as weak as you can participate in. You know nothing. You do not know what our parents and the Archs they fought wished of us, so there is nothing for you to do here."

…*What are you saying our parents wanted!?*

She asked him a question.

"All mom said was that she wanted to see heaven because dad died! She only wanted to see him after he had died! She never said she wanted anyone to kill people with Tuning!"

"You are simply ignorant," he spat back at her before closing his eyes. "Either way, you are no match for me with your spoiled style of Tuning. …Just watch."

He took a breath.

"This is true Tuning!"

He moved his Device in an absolute straight line to use it as the Baton.

With an ear-splitting metallic sound, the Device's tip stabbed into the asphalt.

"Word Accel, you Live with an Octave of 40,960,000!"

After his shout, he released his Live.

"Haaaaaaaa!"

Pushed on by his voice, the Device sank further down.

The sword seemed to actually fall straight down as the guard and hilt were swallowed up by the asphalt.

It vanished almost immediately.

A short pause followed.

In contrast to Double Lee's previous actions, all sound vanished.

However, that great silence was soon broken.

Part 6

The reactor was destroyed.

The top of the concrete structure split open like a rice bowl and flames burst out.

A scarlet pillar rose toward the heavens.

The sound of the blaze shook the air and did not stop.

More pillars of flames rose at set intervals like an echoing sound.

There were just as many as there were reactors in the thermal power station.

The sixteen pillars reached the night sky.

The Nein Engels were gathered there.

However, the sixteen pillars of fire surpassed the Nein Engels and rose further and further, where they slowly pressed together and overlapped.

The sixteen pillars spiraled and intertwined until they had become one.

By that time, a bestial face had formed at the end.

It was a dragon's face.

The scarlet dragon began to gain a real body instead of one made of fire. It bent its nearly kilometer-long body in the night sky, each and every scale twinkled like the stars, and it opened its great maw.

It roared.

Its voice shook the atmosphere from the sky.

And other voices answered.

They were also dragon voices. They belonged to the three dragons produced elsewhere.

And at the same time, Hong Kong shook.

Part 7

"!"

Akira looked down at the vertical shaking of the earth below her feet.

Double Lee used his six wings to float in the air before her.

Roaring dragons shook the sky overhead.

There were four dragon cries in all. The dragons of the four elements had been activated.

The ground was torn away before Akira's eyes.

"Eh?"

By the time she voiced her confusion, the ground became Lives and flew up into the sky. Similarly, the ground, the grass, and even the lamps became Lives and lost their form. They all floated upwards.

Akira knew where they were headed.

They were joining that which the white Nein Engels clung to as they decorated the sky. They were joining the body of the Earth Burn that ruled this land.

The red earth Burn's long body formed a white spiral and rose further and further toward heaven.

Its roar shook without end.

The rumbling of the earth never ended its groaning.

With those two performances in the background, Akira heard an unpleasant Live.

…This Live!?

Her questioning thoughts were crushed.

"Ahh!?"

She heard screams at overwhelming volume.

This was not just one or two and it was not a solidified chorus of voices. These were probably the screams of the tens of thousands of humans and Glossolalians who had failed to escape in time.

The simple Tempo pierced through Akira as a Live with a yellow Word Color.

And amid it all, she heard a Live similar to the ringing of a bell.

She knew what it was.

This was the scream of Hung Hom's Holy Carpenter Church. It was the screams of the people praying there.

She covered her ears to escape it all, but that was not enough to block out the ringing Lives.

Hong Kong's scream produced a Message carrying the word "tragedy" and she heard the crying voices of the panicked, fleeing people vanishing into the sky. It was enough for her knees to give out below her.

"…!"

Speechless, she heard Double Lee speak.

"Look. This is Tuning!"

He moved his wings to take flight.

Surprised, Akira grimaced at the screams and reached out toward her brother.

But there was no way she could reach him. Her fingers tightly grasped only empty air.

And she reflexively gave a shout.

"Gunmal!"

She was nearly in tears as Double Lee joined the chorus in the sky.

"Remember this! Our parents used Tuning and Busting as a weapon! Do you understand!? This is how Tuning is used! It is meant for destruction like this!"

"No!" she shouted. "That…that has to be wrong!"

Morning Section - Ending: Autograph Session

"I was right! Akira is still herself!"

Genius heard Gunmal give a shout.

…Akira?

She wiped away the blood flowing from her injured cheek and looked at Gunmal.

His Device was still lowered in his right hand and it did not move. The coat that matched his height was in tatters.

His face, body, arms, and legs were injured. He had been pierced by Genius's light in several places.

But despite all the injuries, he had not changed his fighting style. He did not try to kill his opponent, he did not release his Live, and he avoided any definitive blows.

"I'm impressed you can fight while Busting like that."

…He's used to this.

Genius stopped moving and J-Gun stepped up next to her.

Gunmal also stopped to face the Nein Engel and dead man.

He looked a bit up toward heaven.

“So I finally get my answer.”

“Your answer?”

He only smiled at her question and there was strength in his eyes.

“I doubt anything I say would get through to him, so you tell my brother there’s no reason to feel guilty about me.”

“Eh?”

“You’ve shared your Live with him, so you can get through to him, right?”

With that, he looked fully up into the night sky.

A river of Nein Engels flowed through that moonlit and starlit darkness and the flight of four Earth Burns controlled the flow of that river.

“It’s been a while since I’ve done this.”

He sounded carefree, but he adjusted his grip on his Device.

He moved it to his flesh-and-blood left hand.

And Genius saw something in the movement she had not seen before.

In an instant, he swung down the Device.

But this time, he did not remain silent.

He did not “tear” at the air or “strike” the earth.

He released his own Live.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

As Hong Kong approached the brink of destruction, his powerful Live clawed at and raced through the city.

The changing city was further changed by his Live.

No one there knew where that change would take it.

Afterword

Miss, how are you feeling in this lazy afternoon sun?

I, for one, am sleepy.

(Omitted) the ominous time of 4:30 AM, so I'm only so wide awake because I finished writing the second part of Hong Kong (omitted) through the first half while eating the Häagen-Dazs I bought at the convenience store with the pale kid, so (omitted)

That's no good at all.

When I'm feeling this sleepy, there's nothing like calling a friend to wake me up.

"Hello, this is T."

"The phone number you just answered is not currently in use. Please hang up and-…"

"This is Kawakami, isn't it?"

"How did you know?"

"I had a feeling it was just about my turn."

"Well done, then. Did you look through the rough draft of Hong Kong A I gave you before?"

"Yeah, I read it. I loved how manly the warrior from the continent of Mu was when he showed up partway through."

"There wasn't anything like that in there."

"Just kidding. Get mad too much and you'll go bald. I still curse you for getting it all cut off at the barbershop."

"I just fell asleep and they cut it way too short. …Hey! Don't just hang up!"

The selfish bastard didn't know how to respond.

Anyway, I've been so very thankful for all the letters from readers I've been getting.

I sent a New Year's card or commemorative card to everyone who sent their thoughts in a letter or postcard. If anyone feels like yelling "I didn't get anything like that, dammit!" like some of the more violent people on the streets, then your letter must not have reached me for some reason. If you don't mind the trouble, please send it again. (This is getting long. I really like writing, don't I?)

Now, then. This one was split into two parts, so it's really turned into something amazing.

What is the connection between Akira's parents and Huang Daquan? What is their connection with the General? What happened in Double Lee, Gunmal, and the others' pasts? What is the contradiction in the Flight Song? And what will happen to Hong Kong?

I've left all that hanging, but it will all be resolved in the second part. A lot of it is closely related, so make sure you don't miss anything while reading.

And the story has grown so much because I decided to start the City Series in earnest with Hong Kong. That's why I threw in a whole bunch of the ideas for the setting I'd been stocking up on. (This is all thanks to the people who supported me with Berlin and London. Thank you.)

And as the story expands, the Afterword quickly grew by two pages, the book itself also got longer, and the second part is longer still.

Am I trying to write a dictionary here?

I don't really get it, but I've been hearing something about Osaka lately?

That's right. Osaka.

What's that about?

To answer your question, um, it's the City world's version of Osaka, Japan.

I'm making a game set there. I make it sound simple, but let me make one thing clear: producing video games is my real job. I'm producing it and writing the scenario because that's where my abilities lie.

But it would be cheating to talk too much about a game in a novel afterword, so if you're interested check on the internet: http://www.tenky.co.jp/

That should tell you what I'm doing.

And with that personal business out of the way, I just finished rereading this first part while listening to Angel Night by PSY・S. (It fits this book so well.)

"Everyone has this kind of power, don't they?"

That's what it made me think.

What that means and what happens next will be in the second part and I hope to talk about a number of things in that afterword.

Let's hurry onward.

October 1997. A morning of a sudden cold wave.

-Kawakami Minoru